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THE INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE FUTURE OF...

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Inside GameCube: What makes Nintendo's 128bit hardware tick?

Linking up: Why GBA connectivity will be Nintendo's next big thing

Top ten: The games that matter, including Mario Kart: Double Dash, F-Zero GX, Pikmin 2, Star Fox 2

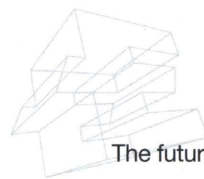
Interviews: Shigeru Miyamoto and Nintendo Europe's David Gosen

The Making Of... Metroid Prime

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The future of electronic entertainment

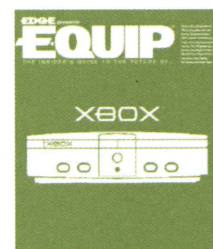
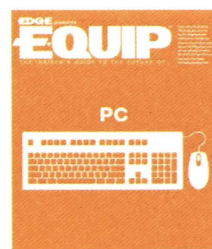
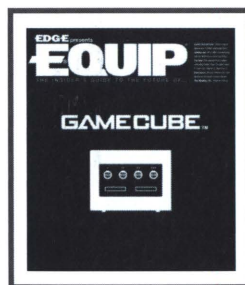
Right from the very beginning, GameCube was an unusual Nintendo product. Where, for example, was the killer app, the 128bit equivalent of *Super Mario World* or *Super Mario 64*, the games that had launched Nintendo's previous two generations of hardware? *Luigi's Mansion* certainly wasn't it, and nor was *Wave Race*.

And that controller – was it unorthodox just for the sake of being different? How about those limited-capacity discs? Nintendo's miniature media platters simply flew in the face of the latest round of gaming hardware's convention.

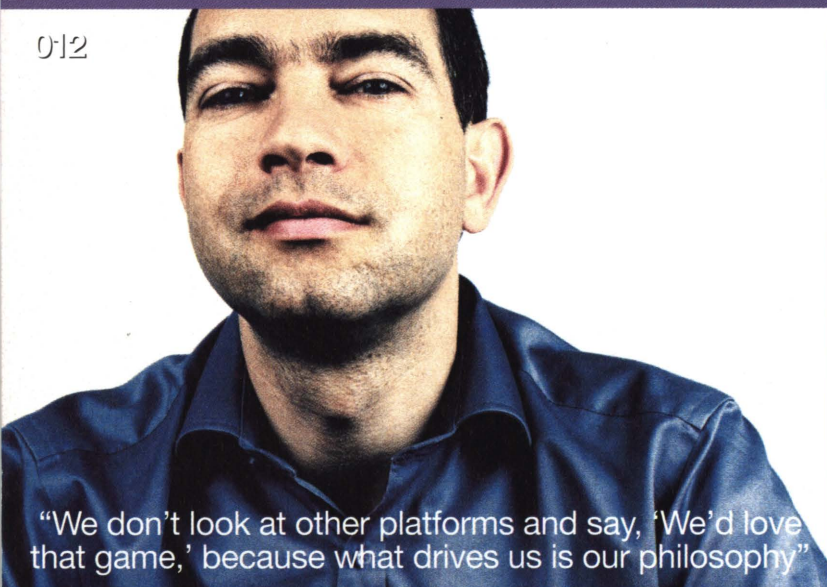
Since the company released its console it has shown no signs of catching Sony, while Microsoft now appears to have beaten it into third place. But we are seeing signs of a new Nintendo emerging. No, it's not going to join the online gaming party just for the sake of it. No, it does not believe that its console needs to be anything more than a gaming machine. No, it will not be bringing *Animal Crossing* to Europe because it is focusing on other properties. But the company *has* set about repairing some of the fragile bridges that span the distance between its Kyoto HQ and the thirdparty development community. It *is* aware of the need to have more adult-focused titles within its portfolio. And its Euro boss *is* willing to answer **Equip**'s questions (see p12).

And it has technology with immense potential, as many developers attest (see p90). They also claim that it's the most programmer-friendly console out there. So, like we say: GameCube – an unusual Nintendo product.

In this issue **Equip** looks at the next step in its evolution – and finds time to take in a bit of GBA, too.

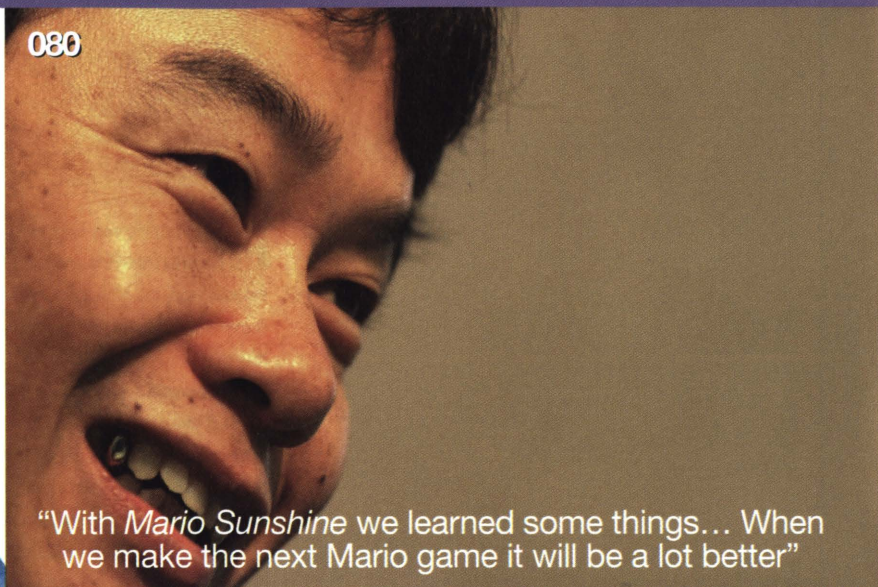


012



"We don't look at other platforms and say, 'We'd love that game,' because what drives us is our philosophy"

080



"With *Mario Sunshine* we learned some things... When we make the next Mario game it will be a lot better"

012



072 No Ball Games



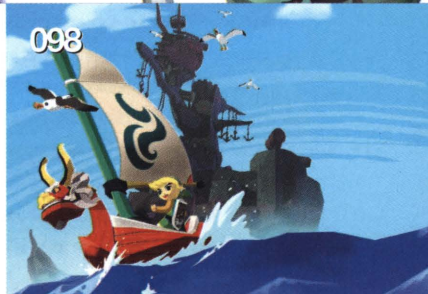
030



086



098



104



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Contents

"What do I think of Sony's PSP? When I hear the name PSP, what comes to mind is 'pseudo SP'"



GameCube's Top Ten

- 040 F-Zero GX
- 044 Mario Kart: Double Dash
- 048 Pikmin 2
- 050 Wario World
- 052 Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg
- 054 Star Fox 2
- 056 Rogue Squadron: Rebel Strike
- 058 Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles
- 060 Kirby Air Ride
- 061 1080° Avalanche

012 Interview: David Gosen

Has there been a more difficult time to head up Nintendo's Euro operation? This man would say no.

020 A Brand Apart

What does it take to sell consoles? **Equip** looks at Nintendo's approach – and considers some others

030 Animal Magic

It's perhaps the best GC title Europe has never (officially) seen. **Equip** examines *Animal Crossing*

064 The Strongest Link?

Nintendo is convinced that GC-GBA link-up is The Next Big Thing. But what about the games?

072 Monkey Business

There's a game in your collection with depths you've never seen. **Equip** unpeels Sega's *Super Monkey Ball*

080 Interview: Shigeru Miyamoto

Nintendo's iconic designer/producer explains why *Metal Gear Solid 3* would be easier on GameCube

086 Thinking Inside The Box

Does GameCube contain the most elegantly designed technology ever seen in a console? **Equip** finds out

094 Interview: Kenichi Sugino

The late Gumpel Yokoi was the father of the Game Boy Boy, but it has a stepfather, too. **Equip** meets him

098 Zelda: Nintendo's Awakening?

It was the game everyone expected to be perfect. But where does Link's latest adventure fall short, and why?

104 The Making Of... Metroid Prime

It was supposed to fail, but Retro Studios succeeded with Samus Aran's 3D adventure. **Equip** discovers how

112 The Big Picture

A shiny little piece of Nintendo-related hardware lovingly shot for your lustful viewing pleasure

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RedEye's life got cold. Maybe four or five years ago, forever and a night ago, perhaps a little more. Suffocated by 64, bored of lonely *Nights*, he turned to Sony and post-pub gaming. You'll remember it: when Lara crashed on to cover of 'The Face', when *Wipeout* sat comfortably with Red Bull and vodka, when clean-cut men jerking from left to right in front of PlayStation pods were gaming's so-visual front.

There was something about it, that machine. Now it's just a grey box, made thoroughly uncool by omnipresence in Cash Converters nationwide, but then it was expensive, angular, carried that Sony seal of expensive quality. People, friends who didn't game, could cast their gaze across it unafraid. Hell, some of them would even ask to have a go. The N64, a squat, pear-shaped lump, found itself shepherded to the rear of RedEye's AV setup, then into the cupboard.

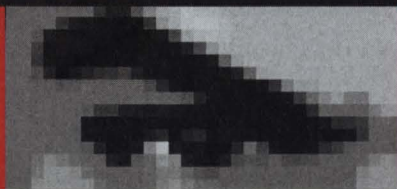
secondary school. Stopped buying into Grange Hill's drugs propaganda a little later. At some point you stopped listening to manufactured music, traded it for something more real. Well, boys did, anyway. Expectations and patterns for females are slightly different, but still exist. They threw you out of their social circle post-puberty; by sixth form, the girls allowed you back.

The last part's the most interesting. See, sooner or later we rescind all these decisions we subconsciously make as part of growing up, when we realise that all being mature really means is being old, and being old isn't really that desirable after all. That's when the heat returned to RedEye's life; when he disowned the part of his brain that said behave according to the herding rules dictated in lads' mags; when he returned to liking what he likes.

Now, if you've bought into this magazine,

See, Nintendo specialise in making a very specific, very bright type of videogame, and until you look like someone with a good, honest, open heart, you'll just come across as a supernerd espousing videogame paedophilia as the way forward. It's all this unwarranted anger at everything you don't like that does your opinions a disservice. But still, you can't change it – it's just anti-passion for the sort of things you enjoy doing, isn't it? No. Good advice: ignore your instinct for a second, and take your open mind cross media.

For example, it is absolutely hilarious that your brain thinks people will think more of you if you like Radiohead and less of you if you like Steps, but that's the way it works, and if you can snap out of it you will grow. Relevance? Nintendo are everything you ever wanted when you were five; everything you grew out of when you were 15; everything you learned to accept again now you're 25. When the



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Nintendo and the fickle hand of the gamer

At first he felt like Judas, but then RedEye rationalised it as a tactic for the greater good. If you could persuade the people that gaming was cool, by showing them angular spaceships rather than chubby plumbers, maybe more people would get involved. And if that meant relegating RedEye's beloved to sight unseen, well, that's how it has to be. White lies.

In truth, RedEye just got scared. Getting older, he found himself in love with a world that didn't seem to want to love him back. Nintendo were Peter Pan, refusing to grow up with their contemporaries; as RedEye and his peer group's interests changed, the Kyoto company kept churning out the same-old sequels, pushing characters from the Mushroom Kingdom to an audience more interested in a different kind of 'shroom. And it didn't matter if RedEye's generation no longer took to their drug, because there would always be more children. "They don't care if you leave," said the persuasive voices inside RedEye's head, "Nintendo don't want you back."

As humans get older their responsibilities change, and so do the things society obliges them to reject. Chasing maturity is innate. You stopped playing with action figures before you enter

there's a fair chance you're one of these people who turns GameCube purple whenever someone says Nintendo's for kids. RedEye's written about this before: in brief, Nintendo *is* for kids, but there's nothing wrong with that, in the same way that it's not wrong for an adult to appreciate 'Toy Story' or

warmth returned to RedEye's life, he didn't burn his PlayStation. Sony make brilliant games, goddamned wonderful slices of electronic entertainment, and it's important to remember that and to praise them as much as the kids in purple, if only to lend credibility when you're playing

Nintendo *is* for kids, but there's nothing wrong with that, in the same way that it's not wrong for an adult to appreciate 'Toy Story'

The Powerpuff Girls. So, sure, we're over that little hurdle. Now all we have to deal with everyone else's prejudices, and the rest of yours.

See, you ask everyone else to give a little, and you have to give a little yourself. The patterned destruction of everything that doesn't fit in your personal philosophy has to go. At the moment you shrine what you love; bomb what you don't. 'The Matrix' is the best thing ever! All period dramas are the suck. Pop music is for kids! Sony's for the post-pub generation. I hate Venus! Let's go live on Mars! Attack what you know you hate, sure, but don't generalise from hypothesis; when you espouse this monodynamic love-hate thing as your way of living, you destroy any credibility your plea for people to open their hearts to Nintendo ever held.

evangelist for the big N.

Because, as long as you state plainly that there's nothing culturally important to be drawn from, say, the *Girls Aloud* album, how can you expect other people to do anything other than draw similar conclusions about videogames? Open your mind to every single facet, every part of popular culture. Don't express opinion based on what you've liked before, or what you think you ought to like. Stop. Listen. Consume. What do you hear? Your psyche playing life like it was Nintendo, giving not a shit about the perceived age range of entertainment it's thrilling to, shagging the part of your subconscious that defines what you're allowed to enjoy. Listen to it laughing. That's the sound of the underground.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with Equip's.



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*I'm seeking men with heart,
men of spirit and courage,
you must be fast with a cutlass
and fearless in battle.*



*The uncharted skies are riddled
with hidden dangers but also
unimaginable beauty. Will you join me?*



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There surely cannot be anyone who denies that the GameCube is, as Tim Robbins so memorably said of his hula-hoop in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, "you know... for kids." Its standard costume is childlike purple; the big plastic buttons are designed to take all manner of abuse from small, inexpert hands; it even has a carrying handle so you can lug it to your best friend's slumber party.

On the other hand, the child-friendly cartridge format was abandoned after the transition from the N64, and the mini DVDs on which GameCube products are encoded easily remain small enough for consumption by determined toddlers. They're also distressingly easy for grownups to lose.

And it's easy to remain unconvinced by the GameCube controller. The configuration of the face buttons, whereby one's right thumb rests on the large green A, but can easily roll over to B, Y

hides the light of its capable chipset under the bushel of a Fisher-Price plastic carapace.

And yet, in terms of pure aesthetics, GameCube's *Rogue Squadron* was arguably the most impressive launch game on any of the three systems, thanks to its stunningly solid recreations of 'Star Wars' space and land environments. The console has continued to deliver visual experiences in *Luigi's Mansion*, the *Resident Evil* remake and *Metroid Prime*, all of which quietly outshine almost anything else available.

Furthermore, some GameCube titles out-hardware the majority of games on other systems. At first, titles such as *Super Mario Sunshine* and *Metroid Prime* seem to offer bright, busy, pick-up-and-play thumb candy, but in terms of mechanics and structure, they offer some of the most retro gaming experiences around. *Sunshine* becomes an unforgiving history lesson in the evolution of

dominates a huge market of pre-teens with the Game Boy and GBA, so it made sense to build a console that could plug into that captive audience.

The downside is that, despite the intriguing possibilities of GBA connectivity, GameCube is beginning to look like a closed-off system. The proprietary media enabled the console to be small, but a slightly bigger machine would've enabled it to compete in the same home entertainment context as its rivals – by offering DVD film playback. The fact that it's 'only' a games machine makes a difference to many casual consumers. And GameCube's stubborn refusal to join the Internet-connectivity party, apart from the joke of a clip-on analogue modem for *Phantasy Star Online*, is another factor. Online console gaming may not yet be quite ripe for the mass market, but Sony and Microsoft understand that the race is already on to build an unassailable lead in that area.



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

Don't judge this console by its cover

or X, is an interesting concept, but the non-linear layout is less than intuitive. Meanwhile, the location of the Z button defies belief. The right forefinger rests naturally on the trigger, so in order to hit Z, it has to perform an ergonomically ludicrous, acrobatic up-and-over motion to avoid getting caught on the trigger's protruding lip.

It's a far cry from the N64 controller, which seduced the hands immediately. For the GameCube, Nintendo has created something that in design terms is a no-man's-land between its previous controller and the neutral flexibility of the DualShock2. And while the Wavebird, a radio-controlled version of the pad, has clawed back some of Nintendo's reputation for innovation, it was hardly revolutionary.

The controller is symptomatic of the GameCube's general ontological confusion: it's never been sure whether it wants to be a toy or a real gamers' machine. It's also one of the most modest consoles in history. You don't hear Nintendo boasting about polygon counts or MIPS figures; and whereas PlayStation2 and Xbox are designed to look like serious hardware, Nintendo

platform gaming, while *Prime* is a throwback to the days of respawning monsters and hours of backtracking re-exploration.

The console thus sends out very mixed messages – sometimes even within the same game. The delightful *Pikmin* is one of the cutest titles ever, but becomes quite a sophisticated

GameCube is the only dedicated videogame console left, and it may be the last. Commentators have often wondered how Nintendo would fare as a hardware manufacturer without its legendary IPs. And while this may be the most multiplatform console generation ever, the lack of frontline product such as *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind*

GameCube's problem is really one of image, an image inevitably informed by its physical appearance and the Day-Glo look of so many of its games

exercise in resource management which may go over the head of your average six-year-old, while the ensphered simians of *Super Monkey Ball* have made many a player weep with rage as they fall to their doom for the zillionth time.

GameCube's problem, then, is really one of image, an image inevitably informed by its physical appearance and the Day-Glo look of so many of its games. But what choice did Nintendo have? PlayStation2 was already the VHS of next-gen consoles, the safe choice with the wide range, while Microsoft was gearing itself to attract the muscle-obsessed Otaku market. Nintendo

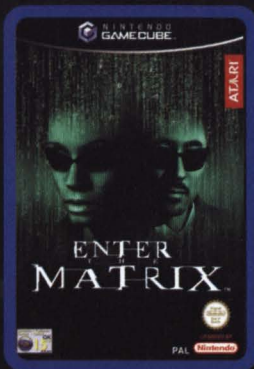
Waker would give the average gamer little reason to choose GameCube over rival consoles, on which many of the same games are available. *Wind Waker* is beautiful, sure, but it's really only an evolution of the ideas in *Ocarina of Time*...

So Nintendo is at a crossroads. Will it pursue its ever-younger core demographic with another console that interfaces with Nintendo products, but pretends the rest of the world doesn't exist? Or will it 'do a Sega', and decide that the best way to exploit *Zelda* and co is to have them running on as many machines as possible? Either way, the kids will vote with their pockets.

Steven Poole is the author of *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames* (Fourth Estate). Email steven_poole@mac.com

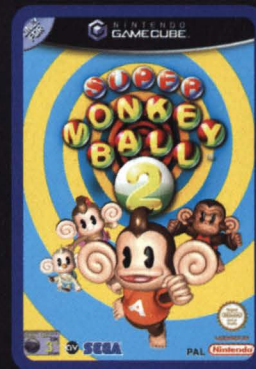
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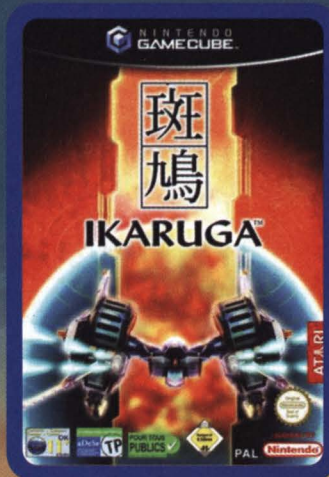
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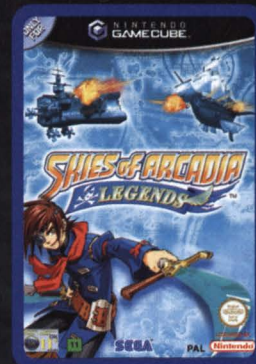
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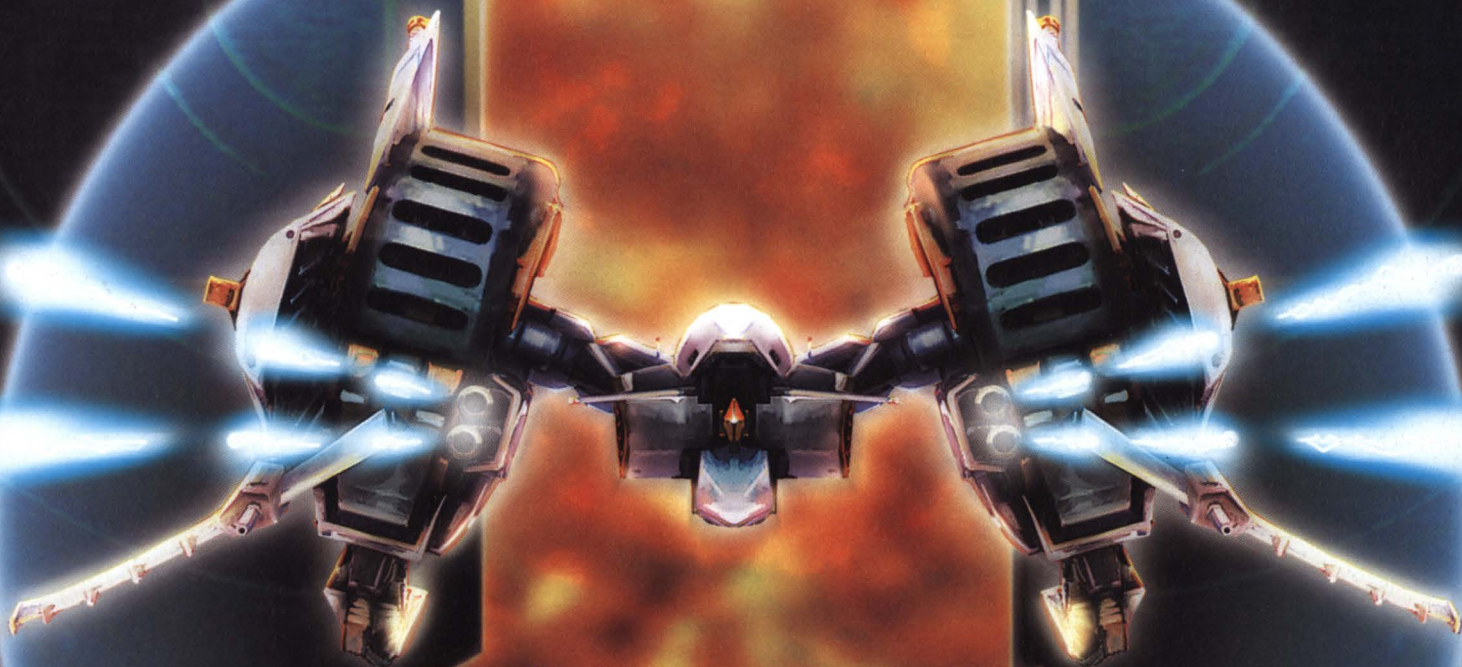
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Me and Nintendo go back a long way. Right back to the original NES, when it was first distributed in the UK with the gyroscope-juggling *R.O.B.* and *Super Mario Bros.* But, thanks to Nintendo's risible support for the European market, I always opted to import, merrily paying over the odds for exclusive access to new titles.

On balance, I think my greatest gaming love affair has been with Nintendo's N64. I'm not sure why: a mixture of Nintendo's gaming values, convenience, the sublime joypad – and possibly a desire to move away from Sony's increasingly mass-market PlayStation. Around half of my all-time top ten faves have a '64' suffix...

So when news finally broke of GameCube, I immediately became one of its biggest supporters, genuinely believing this would be Nintendo's big comeback. The machine seemed to have it all: programmer-friendly architecture, state-of-the-art

wasn't a patch on *MP3*. Bit by bit, my carefully constructed dream was falling apart. Even *Super Mario Sunshine* proved to be a let down, marred by camera problems, a fiddly control system and archaic game dynamics. So *SMS* duly took its place in Game's second-hand bin, alongside half-a-dozen other copies. Clearly, I wasn't the only one who didn't much rate it.

When Rare's four-years-in-the-making epic *Starfox Adventures* proved to be another slice of tedium, the GameCube was ignominiously relegated to a living room cabinet, out of sight. It lay there, unused, for months, and thoughts of a trade-in were only thwarted by sudden dramatic price cuts by Argos and Dixons.

But today, with the appearance of *Metroid Prime* and the welcome arrival of *Super Monkey Ball 2*, my 'Cube is currently off the endangered list. And then, of course, there's *Wind Waker*. Sure,

no-man's-land between quality and exclusivity. Nintendo must be breathing a sigh of relief now that Capcom is firmly on board.

Indeed, one has to wonder if Shigeru Miyamoto, once Nintendo's greatest asset, is rapidly becoming its greatest liability. The man's genius is not in any dispute, but he's now a middle-aged family guy whose greatest vices are gardening and the banjo. Is he really the type of figurehead to help deliver Nintendo gaming to the skateboarding nu-metal generation?

There's an interesting comparison to be made between Nintendo and that other bastion of family entertainment, Disney. For the last two decades, both companies operated entirely on their own terms, seemingly oblivious to external forces. But increasingly they're becoming anachronisms; products of a gentler time, gradually losing their way in a frantic, hardcore 21st century.



HARD TIMES

Steve Jarratt

Confessions of a videogame hardware addict

components, a great price point, disc-based storage, plenty of thirdparty support... even the promise of GBA-GC connectivity.

This time it sounded like Nintendo had its European support sorted, too, and so – sick of the huge premium on imports – I duly waited for the PAL release: a black unit to match my Japanese GBA, a couple of pads, plus *Super Monkey Ball*, *Rogue Squadron* and *Pikmin* (I'd already played *Luigi's Mansion* and *Wave Race* to death).

My first real disappointment arrived in the shape of the AV connector. With S-Video removed from the PAL units, I couldn't use my old N64 cable or run the picture through my AV amp, so I had to rely on inferior composite video. And where was the support for 16:9?

Super Monkey Ball proved to be the sole highlight of those early days, with *Rogue Squadron* little more than a good-looking update of the flawed N64 versions, and *Pikmin* – though cute and innovative – a little short-lived. After a painful post-launch hiatus, I gleefully bought *Mario Party 4*, secure in the knowledge that this, surely, would be the best version so far... Lamentably, it

I would've preferred a dark, cinematic *Zelda*, but I'm not particularly offended by *Wind Waker*'s cel-shading. No, my problem is that I wonder if I have the staying power to get embroiled in yet another rambling adventure, collecting deku nuts and squirrelling away the rupees. (No doubt by the time you read this, I'll be sailing across a cartoon

Disney's 'Treasure Planet' was a well-meaning attempt to spice up its act, to get in touch with 'the kids', but it felt too much like your dad trying out the latest moves down the disco. You could argue that *Super Mario Sunshine* was Nintendo's 'Treasure Planet': a classic tale jazzed up with fancy technology and some novel touches, but

With the appearance of *Metroid Prime* and the welcome arrival of *Super Monkey Ball 2*, my 'Cube is currently off the endangered list

sea, blissfully heading off in entirely the wrong direction, as usual.)

But beyond *Wind Waker*... well, Nintendo's line-up for the UK looks decidedly threadbare. Of the titles that have made it to the release schedule, precious few are originals. I mean, when one of the highlights is a sequel to *Pikmin*, I think that says a lot about the state of Nintendo's in-house development. And despite the company's best efforts, the GameCube still lives and dies by its first and secondparty releases. Thirdparty titles are either released first on PS2, or simply look better on Xbox; GameCube sits in a

which, deep down, only served to highlight an underlying paucity of imagination.

The enforced GameCube price cuts and the release of Game Boy Advance SP has seen a sudden rejuvenation in the company's highstreet fortunes. But the Big N still has serious decisions to make. Should it endeavour to take on Xbox and PlayStation head-to-head and follow more mature market trends? Or simply concede defeat and look towards securing its kiddy heartland?

Either way, it needs to do something and quickly. Though, worryingly, 'quickly' has never been a key word in Nintendo's lexicon.

Steve Jarratt was the launch editor of *Edge* magazine. He is a senior editor at Future Publishing Ltd.



IT'S NOT FOR EVERYONE

E125 on sale June 13

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Interview:

David Gosen

Being Nintendo's European managing director must be... *interesting*. On the one hand you're overseeing the most revered brand in gaming; on the other you're dealing with some of the most difficult-to-please consumers imaginable. **Equip** went to the man himself to find out more

While Sony has seemed to get everything right since it entered the videogame hardware business in the mid-'90s, and Microsoft has shown that it is no slouch despite its own lack of experience, the home of Mario, which has been in the industry almost since its inception, has in recent years been the target of varied and significant criticism.

As Nintendo's European chief, **David Gosen** faces a number of challenges.

Equip met up with him at his London HQ to find out what's it like to be in his position.

What do you do on a day-to-day basis?

The great thing is that no two days are the same. My responsibility encompasses the whole of Europe, so I have a lot of contact with our European markets, which we control directly – the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Holland and Italy – and others that we run through distributors. So we have an interesting dual strategy for distribution in Europe. And typically I'll go to one or two of our European markets a week. So Monday next week I'm in the UK, Tuesday and Wednesday I'm in Italy, then, on Thursday and Friday, I'm in Germany. That's typical. The laptop, the

mobile phone – they're all fundamental to my job. I spend the time working with the managing directors of each of the countries, but also with my functional direct reports within Nintendo of Europe – people like Jim Merrick, who's my marketing director – to ensure the functional side of the business is running smoothly.

What are some of the critical decisions you have to make?

If *only* it were that easy! It's the same thing as many roles, where you move from discussions on strategic issues facing, well, it could be distribution-related, it could be retail-related, it could be pricing-related... It could be the development of new advertising. It could be opening up new markets. It could be planning for E3. It could be arranging major product launches like *Zelda*. So there's a lot of strategic thinking, as well as a lot of coaching, a lot of hands-on action as well. I like to get involved.

Do you play a lot of games?

I'm *not* a hardcore gamer. I'm a casual – *bad!* – gamer. I enjoy them, but I don't progress very far. On *Pokémon Gold* and *Silver*, I collected about 20 Pokémon,

and then got rapidly overtaken by my eight-year-old daughter, who then proceeded to embarrass me. But I love playing, for example, *Metroid Fusion* on Game Boy Advance SP. Given the amount of travelling I do, it's absolutely perfect for me, whether in the airport lounge or on the plane. And that's an outstanding game. So I'm playing that, and *Metroid Prime*, and *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past/Four Swords* at the moment. But I tend to go at a conservative pace. I'm not one of those people who can race through. I enjoy all aspects of the game.

You say you play a lot on the Game Boy Advance SP – has that changed the way you play games?

What it's done is – and this is quite interesting – as I take it out of my briefcase, I sort of rise in stature. I'm happy for people to see that I'm playing with this tremendous piece of hardware.

Does that mean you weren't happy for people to see you playing with the original Game Boy Advance?

I don't think I was unhappy. It's a totally different experience. And I think that was

behind the design of the product. And as a heavy user of handheld gaming, and as someone who was instrumental in its rollout across Europe, I feel very proud when I take the product out. And when someone next to me says, as invariably happens on the plane, "What's that?", it's a great opening intro. Usually, I don't stop talking for the next 45 minutes.

Shouldn't everyone in Europe know what an SP is by now?

I think everyone in the gaming community knows about it. We've sold, well, we've put in 400,000, and it's virtually sold out everywhere. I think that the fact that it's only five weeks' old [at the time of writing] means it's still going to take time to get mass awareness. But at that rate of sale, we're hitting the right people in terms of who we want to buy the SP. We know, for example, that the average age of purchasers was 23. Over half of the purchasers didn't own a GBA before.

Why do you think that is?

Well, when you asked me if it's changed my perception of gaming... I think we've suddenly said to people who previously may

interview david gosen



not have embraced handheld gaming. "Don't be afraid to get it out of your pocket." Because it's a great product, it's cool. It's got a good image. With the metallic design, it looks like a piece of kit you want to play with. And, of course, it has the rechargeable battery and the integrated screen light.

Which is key – the screen on the original GBA model was difficult to see.

On some titles, it may have been darker than some gamers would've liked. But when we did our research, we always got on Game Boy Advance an eight-out-of-ten, 80% satisfaction rating. Technology has allowed us to improve the experience and that's what we always said we'd do: when we can do it, and still get a good price into the market, we'll do it. And that's what happened in the 18 to 20 months between introducing the GBA and launching the SP. Technology moved on so quickly that we could put the screenlight in, put the rechargeable battery in, and deliver that great gaming experience.

It's certainly changed the way people play portable games. Now they can see the screen and they don't have to worry about batteries – but then many of them can't hear what they're playing any more, because there's no headphone socket. Is that a step backwards?

Well, there is an adaptor you can get...

Except you can't, can you? Because it's not available in the shops, and you have to mail order it.

That's right. Again, when we looked at building SP, we had to look at prioritising the features we put in it. And, given the architecture of the unit and the design, in this instance we couldn't get that feature in. And if that means you have to play it with the sound down, I'm sorry, you have to play it with the sound down until you get the adaptor. But I think the feedback we've got has been extremely useful, and clearly we'll take that into consideration when it comes to future developments.

Many people have accused you of selling the Game Boy in instalments. They can either buy the SP headphone adaptor for a tenner now, or they can wait for the GBA EX Super Special SP featuring integrated headphone adaptor in a year's time.

I think that's a somewhat cynical view. Our objective is to do the best we can and give people a chance to play great games anywhere they go. And for the style-conscious, gadget-motivated gamer, SP is great. It really is an outstanding piece of kit. Is there an issue with the headphones? Well, you're saying you'd like headphones, to see an easy option to get the headphones into it. We take that on board and, as we develop, things evolve and we'll be able to include it.

It's just over a year since GameCube launched. How do you feel the last 12 months have gone?

GameCube had an incredible launch, becoming the fastest-selling console in Europe ever. It also had the largest lineup of software at launch for any console. And we closed out the calendar year with an installed base of just over 1.5 million. We saw great titles supporting GameCube and doing exceptionally well. So, for a new product entry, we've done well. It's been a good year. It's not been a great year, but you have to put it into context.

The market has become incredibly competitive, there's no question about it. And the rules have changed. Look at the competition, specifically someone like Microsoft. I've lost count of how many times it's cut the price [of Xbox] now... That sort of high-profile consistent price-reduction policy causes significant issues for its competitors. But it also puts question marks in the mind of the consumer. And

puts question marks around lifecycles. What is the lifecycle of this current generation of consoles? Will it be the same as previous generations'?

So what do you think will be the lifespan of the GameCube?

Well, what Nintendo has always been very good at is stretching the lifecycle of its consoles, making sure that we focus on our installed base. What other platforms have tended to do is lose focus on their old gamers, or existing gamers, as they bring out new console hardware. Nintendo always keeps developing great games for its existing consoles, as well as bringing out new consoles. So there's a chance that the lifecycle of this current range of consoles, instead of being five years, could be four years. But what you can guarantee is that Nintendo can stretch that, and continue to develop games for GameCube, even when the next generation of hardware comes along.

Nintendo continues to develop great games, no one would dispute that, but it doesn't develop a lot of games. Do you still believe in quality over quantity?

In the games industry, there's a very important rule that's been here from day one: 'Software drives hardware.' That's something people tend to forget. Certainly, a lot of the recent pricing activity has driven the market into a commodity position. I think you'll see, in the medium to long term, that it's going to be the quality of the games

Do you think GameCube has the range?

GameCube *unquestionably* has the range. You look at the number of titles we have currently on the shelf... 200? It's arguably too many, but we cover all genres, thanks to our alliances with thirdparties.

Is there any genre in which you're weak?

What's important here is that if the set of games is the same, what's the differentiator? Because graphical representations on screen, unless you're a real expert, are fairly similar. And then if you can get all thirdparty games across all consoles, that doesn't become the differentiator. So the differentiator, going forwards and going back, will be the exclusive games available on your platform.

Which Sony has, essentially, with the *Grand Theft Auto* series. And what Nintendo has is outstanding firstparty in-house development, plus a growing range of secondparty developers to develop games to create that exclusivity. As a gamer, if you go into a shop and can say, "OK, I can get 80 per cent of the games on all platforms, but I can *only* get *Zelda* on GameCube, I can *only* get *Metroid Prime* on GameCube, I can *only* get *Resident Evil...*", that makes the decision for you. Because if you understand great gaming, you're going to want to play those games.

How do you think gamers have changed in the last ten years?

I think they've changed *considerably*. If you

"If you look at Tom Hanks, and look at 'Big', then compare it to the films he makes now... The characters and styles of our games are no different to Hollywood movies and actors"

what's happened now is that this constant price-reduction policy has created a significant inertia in the mind of the consumers. Because they're saying, "We know anyway that the nature of technology means prices fall. Currently, if you look at it, one of the leading manufacturers is cutting its prices every, whatever it is, three months. So I'm just going to wait, because I know the price is going to come down again." So in terms of the shape of the industry, I think the shape of the curve has changed. And not necessarily for the better. I think it also

that'll lead to the success of the console.

Now what's important for Nintendo is that it continues to develop outstanding firstparty games, as it always has done. Is Nintendo as a company ever going to release 40 to 50 firstparty games in a year? Absolutely not. It's going to continue to develop and launch blockbuster games in line with the quality that people have got used to from Nintendo. What you have to do, though, is get the right breadth and depth of games – make sure you have the quality, and, of course, the range.

look at the gamers who came in ten to 12 years ago, they may have been 15 or 16 back then, so they're now 25, maybe thirtysomething. They have other interests, whether it's the pub, girlfriends, football, booze, or whatever. So videogames have to fight much harder for a share of their entertainment space. And then you've also got the younger gamers, where you're also competing with the videos, the movies, a far greater choice of interactive entertainment. So, yes, there's a significant shift in the profile and make-up of gamers today. It's a

much broader range, and I also think the type of game has changed. Whereas before, gamers would pigeonhole themselves into one genre, I think today you see portfolio gamers.

That's an interesting term.

If you think about it, I'm a portfolio gamer. It's just a classical way of describing casual gamers. So you have a need – maybe that you've got half an hour before you go out. You're not going to play *Zelda*, because that's a game of immense strategy. Great fun, but it needs more time. What you're going to do is play a racing game, because you're going out and you want a buzz. So you play, say, half an hour of *Mario Kart*. Sunday afternoon, it's raining outside, you're going to play something you can really immerse yourself in. But when a couple of mates come round in the evening, well, you're not going to play *Zelda*. You get *Mario Kart* out again. It's the right game for the right occasion.

The games you've quoted there are all sequels to games that were out in the

"I think Xbox, the new entrant, has struggled. Turning a market away from it being based on the quality of games and into a commodity market may have implications for our industry"

early '90s. So if the type of gamer has changed, it could be argued that Nintendo's games haven't.

I think what Nintendo's games continue to do is deliver breadth and depth. Now what you have to ensure is that the level of surprise and mystery and challenge – that really is central to Nintendo games – is still relevant. Just because the characters are the same, that doesn't mean the games are. They've evolved. If you look at Tom Hanks, and look at 'Big', then compare it with the films he makes now... The characters and styles of our games are no different to Hollywood movies and actors. Hopefully, what they're doing is evolving into new scripts and new storylines, in the same way as Hollywood movies.

How do you think *Zelda*'s evolved since *A Link to the Past*?

Well, I think the way Miyamoto has taken *Zelda* through this journey, right through

from *Ocarina* to *Majora's Mask*, and then into *Wind Waker*, is a tremendous indication of the guy's creativity.

Oh?

Absolutely. It's legendary. I think you'll find that *The Wind Waker* will be, possibly, when we look back, the game of the decade. Because I think he's made a tremendously courageous move, and followed it with great creative gameplay.

You're talking about that controversial shift to cel-shading?

Yep.

It's certainly a brave move, considering this is Nintendo's big firstparty title. But you say it has the potential to be game of the decade? Do you think it has the breadth of appeal of *GTAIII*? Do you genuinely believe that portfolio gamers, the same people who bought PS2s for *GTAIII*, will see past the cel-shading and buy GameCubes for *Zelda*?

We'll have to wait and see. Certainly, if you look at the accolades *Zelda* is amassing...

But these are from videogame journalists, specialists, people who know games.

Well, you only have to look at the game's performance in the US, where it sold over 800,000 in three to four weeks. There were colossal numbers of pre-orders across Europe. It's significant. And if you have people talking about the quality of your games, then you'll bring new people in. What you find is that, absolutely, the Nintendo heartland, the core advocates, will be the first to buy the game, but you only have to start to play it, to talk about it, and new people will come in.

***GTAIII* performed consistently well in the charts for a good number of months. *Zelda* will do phenomenally well initially, but it'll be interesting to see how well those figures hold up.**

We'll have to get back together again in a few months' time and answer that one.

You could argue, though, that those people who are passionate about *Zelda* are passionate about *Zelda* right now.

It's about growing the base. Great games do that. Software drives hardware. On *Metroid Prime*, we saw hardware grow. On *Zelda*, we'll see significant hardware growth. That's what great games do.

How do you perceive the competition?

I've made a few comments. I think our colleagues at Sony have done a very good job. Chris Deering and his team continue to run a good business, and all credit to them. It's clear they understand gaming. But I think Xbox, the new entrant, has struggled. Turning a market away from it being based on the quality of games and into a commodity market, given the dramatic price cutting, may have implications for our business. For our industry.

Are there any games on either platform you wish you had as a Nintendo exclusive? There must be some.

Nintendo is driven by its own agenda. We do what we do and we try to do it the best

that we can. And we're very clear in our approach... Our firstparty strategy, our secondparty strategy, our thirdparty strategy... We have an outstanding lineup of games this year. So we don't really look at the other platforms and say, "We'd love to have that game," because what drives us is our internal philosophy to deliver the quality, heritage, the icons that we have, and to continue to challenge gamers and get the most out of the games we deliver.

You mentioned your daughter earlier.

Do you have any non-Nintendo consoles in your house?

No.

Has making that kind of decision ever proved controversial?

No, because in their mind there's only one console! But what's important is that my two kids don't spend 24 hours a day playing videogames. It's about balance.

Obviously, Xbox and PS2 both have active online strategies. Nintendo's strategy is different: its online element will only come when there's a demand for it. Can you elaborate on that?

Our position has been consistent for the last couple of years, ever since this great dream of online gaming came about. First, people who tend to focus very heavily online tend not to have a proposition to sell today. I think that's a very important distinction to make. We have a very strong package proposition to sell today. We have an outstanding software lineup. So people who get excited about online, you've got to question what they have to sell today, because online is somewhat a distant dream in terms of being massmarket.

Let me tell you why. You need three things. You need the right business model. You need the right strategy. And you need technology. Let's start with the technology first. Is broadband where it needs to be in order to become a massmarket opportunity? The answer is no. It's still below five per cent penetration in many European markets, depending on which research you use. They're projecting between now and 2006 it'll become maybe 15 per cent to 20 per cent penetration – again, depending on which research you look at. So that's some way off. Then, on top of that, you look at the consumer proposition. What is the consumer there to do? What are they prepared to pay for? One-off? Ongoing? I don't think that's clear. And then put those two together, and look at the third thing. What does the business model look like for you as an operator? Now, today, we believe these three key points don't link. There's not a strong enough link between them to say that this is a strong business model.

So what we're prepared to do is to provide the accessories to our thirdparty publishers, like Sega with *Phantasy Star Online*, which enables them to offer an online proposition. And when the time is right, we'll be there. Are we looking online? Of course we are. But we don't believe the time is right to push headlong into this area.

It may not be a massmarket proposition right now, but at the heart of Nintendo's userbase lies the hardcore who love games and always buy Nintendo. What they want more than anything else in the world is *Mario Kart Online*.





If that's what they want, then I'm afraid they're going to have to wait. And it'll make it all the better when it comes. But we understand and listen to what gamers feed back to us. We have a number of ways that we do this. And we listen to our core userbase in each of our European markets. But we're also trying to run a successful business, and certainly if you look at some of the recent announcements made by our competitors, it shows how tough the market is.

Nintendo has been profitable every year that it's been in the videogame industry. And making that profit enables it to put the money back into development, back into developing the best games that it thinks people want to see. And that's fundamentally important.

But when we talk about online, we also talk about connectivity, and there's this world of Nintendo connectivity that's going to grow, and be a major focus for the company over the coming years. That connectivity's centred on the link between GameCube and GBA.

There's an argument that says that connectivity is similar to the Dreamcast Visual Memory Unit – it has lots of potential, but will it ever be realised?

What's great about our industry is that once games developers pick up on an idea, you start to see it being capitalised upon. You really see them saying, "I can expand the way you can play my game. Hey, let me think about this. I can play

question about it. It's done incredibly well in Japan, and incredibly well in America. But given the hugely complex localisation issues – and it is a very complex game to localise, and that's by way of an explanation rather than an excuse – and given the fact that we're bringing *Pokémon* to Europe this year, the answer's quite simple: we couldn't do both. There's nothing sinister about this. There's no hidden agenda. We just made a

And I think you'll find that the kids, of all ages, will be there and ready, and you'll start to see a significant increase in the awareness of *Pokémon* in the next three to four weeks.

If Sega had published *Pokémon*, do you think the company would still be making consoles today?

That's a very difficult question to answer.

"Animal Crossing is a great game, no question. But given that we're bringing *Pokémon* to Europe this year, we made a decision: we couldn't do both. There's nothing sinister about it"

it on a console. I can get someone to download the data to a handheld, carry on playing that game while he's on a train, and maybe the clock's still ticking away on the console, so maybe it's snowing, or raining, or there's been another attack somewhere else. So that when the guy comes back later in the day and downloads the data, the game hasn't stopped..." As a developer, that's tremendously motivating, because it opens up another door. It'll give the gamer another reason to play, and the developer another reason to stretch the boundaries.

A couple of those ideas you mentioned – realtime gaming, the connectivity with the GBA – were present in *Animal Crossing*, but Europeans never got to see it. Why was that?

Animal Crossing is a great game. No

business decision to say, "We're going to focus on *Pokémon* this year." And that's what we've done.

Hasn't *Pokémon*'s star faded?

You couldn't be further from the truth. I think the *Pokémon* wave is going to hit hard and long.

Kids are fickle, and the number of bundles of *Pokémon* cards in charity shops across the country would suggest it's not the franchise it once was...

The brand is four years old. We haven't released a *Pokémon* game since *Crystal*, about 18 months ago. Clearly, kids are very savvy gamers and understand the role of characters and brands in the industry. And we haven't launched a new game, it's true. But on July 25, we're going to launch *Pokémon Ruby* and *Pokémon Sapphire*. And if you look at the US, where they've sold 2.2 million pieces in four weeks, in Japan where it's over 4 million... And if you look across Europe today, the *Pokémon* TV series still gets very good viewing figures, and they're running repeats that have been on for two years.

What you have is a whole generation who've played *Pokémon* coming in. And you have younger sisters, brothers, who were probably too young to have played before, who'll be in there like a shot. So, in fact, that addressable target market could be twice the size it was the first time round. And when the new TV series hits, when the product licences hit, when the games hit... *Pokémon* is going to be big, and anyone who doesn't believe that from a retail perspective is going to be in for a surprise.

All I can tell you is that across Europe so far, since we launched *Pokémon* in '99, we've sold over 36 million games. That's a tremendous asset to have behind you in your business, and we'll see it drive Game Boy Advance hardware, the original GBA, and give a continuing push for SP, even though at this moment SP doesn't need it.

Let's put it another way: would Nintendo have been in trouble without *Pokémon*?

Nintendo has this incredible ability when times are hard to survive and then thrive. And *Pokémon* certainly helped us at a very important time.

And are you surviving or thriving now?

We're fortunate to have two sides to our business. We operate in a very competitive console business – I think we have to be honest, and say it is very competitive – but we're exceptionally confident about GameCube's role in the future of that market. Again, I'll go back to the lineup of software we have that will really create the difference: *Metroid*, *Zelda*, *Mario Kart*, *Final Fantasy*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Resident Evil*... The list goes on and on. They're real quality gaming franchises, so we're exceptionally confident about the future of GameCube.

Then, on the other side, we have handheld gaming. Game Boy Advance, Game Boy Advance SP, *Pokémon*, *Hamtaro*, *Donkey Kong Country*, *Final Fantasy Tactics*... It goes on and on. So I think we're in for a good, strong year, a year where Nintendo will thrive because – and this goes back to the first thing I said to you – it's about the quality of the games.



For your pleasure

As an exercise, Equip invited a group of young creatives to come up with their own alternatives for GameCube branding, such as this tongue-in-cheek treatment



A Brand Apart

Nintendo once placed all its hopes for console glory on a hirsute, sartorially inept Brooklyn plumber (with moustache) – and then wondered why Sony's gen-X, youth-savvy marketing trumped it at every turn. But now all that's about to change. As the company enters the 21st century, big developments are afoot – but, asks **Equip**, could it be a case of too little, too late?

Mario! Mario! Mario!" chant a crowd of excited children, punching their fists skyward. "Mario! Mario! Mario!" they relentlessly continue. The camera starts to slowly pull away, at first revealing hundreds, then thousands, and, finally, as the view rests above the surface of the planet, a sea of millions of chanting children assembled right across the North American continent, forming an image of Mario's grinning, moustachioed face. The year was 1989 and this was the TV commercial for the impending *Super Mario Bros 3* from Nintendo.

It was a powerful image, and given the company's virtual monopoly of the videogame market at the time (and the frenzy it was capable of generating from its loyal customers), a fairly accurate one, too. Nintendo genuinely had captured the hearts, minds and parents' wallets of an entire generation of gamers.

But **Equip** isn't here to scrutinise decades-old TV campaigns. The above marketing example only serves to illustrate how powerful and influential a videogame brand can be in creating intense loyalty among those who buy into its culture.

Fast forward to over a decade later and the videogame landscape has changed

beyond all recognition. History will record – although, it has to be said, not entirely accurately – that Sony's über-console, the PlayStation, won the battle for the living room through hip, 'generation-X'-targeted advertising campaigns, effectively aligning itself with the music industry and making knowing nods toward the prevalent drug culture of the '90s.

Image, it seems, is everything.

Gamers from eight to 80

Despite being aware of the changing demographic of the average videogamer, Nintendo has been far from successful appealing to it. When the GameCube launched in Europe in May 2002, alongside the many promotions developed were surreal, edgy television advertisements created by global advertising agency Leo Burnett, which featured images of giant glass cubes containing, among other things, contortion artists, Samurai warriors and basketball players.

"The TV ads were great," says **Greg Clark**, creative director of ad agency Source, responsible for campaigns for *Resident Evil*, *Mortal Kombat* and *Gran Turismo*. "I think they were shot incredibly well and got across the 'Cube branding in a

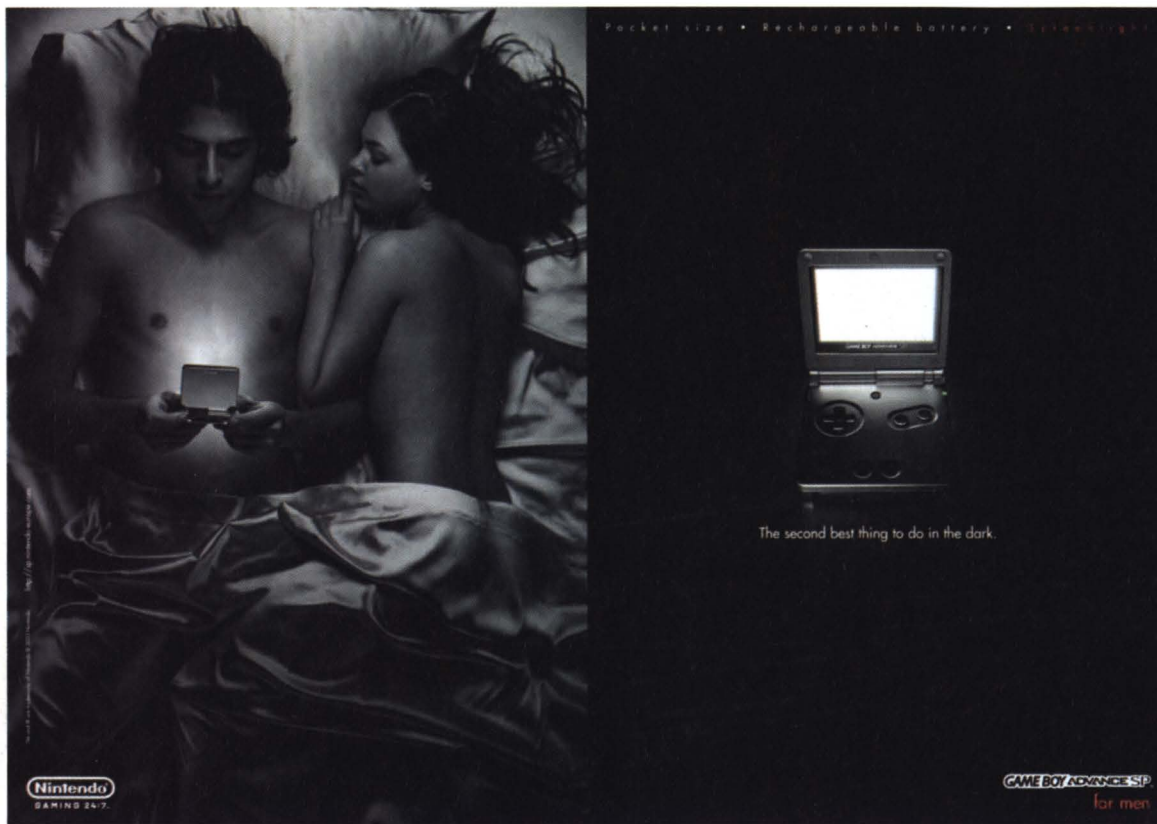
clever way. It looked good, sounded great and made you sit up and think. They seemed to dilute this idea later on by giving in and featuring game footage, but don't we all?"

According to the creatives responsible, the commercials were designed to "show the blurred line between reality and the escapist fantasy of the gaming world, experienced through the Nintendo GameCube." What the adverts also did, however, was highlight the seeming contradiction between Nintendo's own output and the new demographic it was chasing. Lines of brightly coloured Pikmin could be seen nodding their floral craniums to a drum 'n' bass soundtrack, while Mario and friends slugged it out against a pulsating technicolour backdrop.

Nintendo's all-stars

It's ironic, then, that Nintendo's crown jewels, *Mario*, *Zelda*, etc, are now the very reason why Nintendo fails to appeal to the new 'massmarket' courted by Sony.

It's not that Nintendo specifically needs to gain the credibility of this market from a commercial perspective. The *Mario* games are still among the biggest-selling franchises in the world – indeed, Sony or Microsoft



would give their right arms for games with such creative design, innovation and brand loyalty. But to the unenlightened it seems that such titles' visuals hark back to a time when games weren't considered 'cool'.

These gaming icons are the public face of, and represent, everything Nintendo appears to stand for, or, as one gamer told **Equip** when it went out to canvas public

intended culture of the machine it's attached to: the colourful ovals of the SNES branding, the three-dimensional look of the 'N' in the N64 insignia... and now the GameCube logo – a sleek and rather cleverly designed motif which reinforces the aesthetics of the platform.

Brand identity is the intended projection of a company or product. It is the image,

its Nintendo GameCube signature end line, 'Life's a Game.'"

Brand image, however, reveals how the company is actually perceived by the public and what it believes the brand represents. Unfortunately, Nintendo's potent brand image was forged during the '80s, and despite Nintendo's attempted reinvention, it continues to resonate with the public at this level. As a result, Nintendo has, rather negatively in some respects, been labelled as the system choice purely for younger gamers.

Ethical considerations

Nintendo's 'Code of Ethics' was drawn up during the first decade of its market dominance, and was a list of promises to consumers that Nintendo games wouldn't 'depict random, gratuitous or excessive violence, such as blood or body dismemberment,' 'use profanity or obscenity in any form' and, curiously, 'depict excessive force in a sport.'

The list was drawn up not necessarily as a moral codex, but as a marketing strategy which would encourage parents to buy Nintendo products safe in the knowledge that their children wouldn't be 'corrupted' by their investment. In short, it made Nintendo systems a more attractive proposition to those who, at the time, controlled the purse strings. It was a shrewd move, and a wise one given the concerns and the widespread technophobia of the time.

Nintendo eventually relaxed its Code but by then the damage had been done. Censoring games that could be bought in their full claret-ridden glory on other console platforms did little to define the Nintendo brand as a definitive gaming experience for

"The TV ads were great. They were shot incredibly well and got across the GameCube branding in a clever way. It looked good, sounded great and made you sit up and think"

opinion: "Bright and happy, inoffensive games for kids."

Corporate matters

There are three main considerations that a company addresses when marketing itself or its products: corporate identity, brand identity and brand image.

Corporate identity describes a company's visual signature, encompassing the design of its logo, packaging and marketing materials. With each hardware generation, Nintendo has successfully created a visual identity which reflects the

values, quality and culture that a company wishes to impart on its potential customers. In essence, it's how a company would like its name or product to be perceived.

Nintendo's European managing director **David Gosen**'s comments at the GameCube launch underline how Nintendo would like to position itself in the eyes of the consumer: "Nintendo GameCube will target everyone from every walk of life who loves playing games, no matter their age. Nintendo believes that gaming is an attitude not an age and Nintendo's attitude to gaming is reflected in

the older teen looking for more intense, darker gaming thrills.

The company's squeaky-clean brand image, which had once been a key selling point, now opened up the market to rival hardware manufacturers who were eager to exploit a sassier, wealthier and more demanding demographic.

The seeds were planted

Nintendo continued unabated, promoting its enormously successful *Mario* brand and further developing its other commercially successful franchises, franchises that

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Nintendo



Built to last

None of these treatments are official, of course, but you could imagine this one, in particular, working in reality. Would its slogan be prophetic, though?



GameCube: it's hip to be square



Could something as direct as this ever work in affecting the massmarket's perception of Nintendo's console? Or are consumers just too cynical?

boasted bright and vivid game characters whose colourful designs were born out of the technical limitations of previous hardware incarnations. It was up to thirdparty developers to fill the gaps between Nintendo's output and provide the console with a wide variety of genre types to attract newer audiences to its hardware, audiences that had little interest in the software Nintendo was creating.

The thirdparty exodus away from Nintendo and towards the more developer-friendly PlayStation left Nintendo, for the most part, with only its own output with which to sell its hardware. Consumers would look at the available software for the N64 and draw their own conclusions as to whom the console was aimed.

The fightback

The GameCube is proving to be an extremely important console for Nintendo, possibly the most important in its history. It's clear in the way the company marketed the platform at launch, and the thirdparty support it has courted, that Nintendo is taking steps to endear GameCube to both a loyal userbase and the wider gaming market. The launch lineup featured a tick-list

medium which, it could be argued, is largely preaching to the converted.

The rebirth of cool

There is one piece of hardware, however, with which Nintendo has had no such difficulty securing a valuable market share, a console already highlighting that in certain markets Nintendo has a mountain to climb, and in others that it is simply looking for new ones to conquer.

Almost a year and a half after the launch of the Game Boy Advance, Nintendo set about reinventing its hugely successful portable and took the opportunity to target a whole new demographic – the style-conscious, gadget-obsessed twenty-something male. Far from simply adding a backlight and thereby addressing criticisms levelled at the original unit, the Game Boy Advance underwent a complete cosmetic makeover, one which made it resemble mobile phone or palmtop technology, the very same types of handheld gadgets this demographic were already spending their disposable incomes on.

The rebranded GBA SP launched with a ten-million-Euro marketing budget, with print campaigns in the lifestyle, male-orientated

Its first year has already seen the release of much darker software – titles such as *Eternal Darkness* and *Resident Evil*

of genres, and was, intentionally or not, devoid of a *Mario* title to overshadow the thirdparty efforts, instead relying on *Luigi* and a new franchise, *Pikmin*, to placate Nintendo loyalists.

Its first year has already seen the release of much darker software – titles such as *Eternal Darkness*, and, importantly, a reworking of the survival horror classic *Resident Evil*, as well as, more recently, *Resident Evil Zero*. All thirdparty coups which Nintendo hoped would dispense any preconceived notions the general public might have about the Nintendo brand being a little too 'soft'.

Of course, only time will tell whether this strategy has been successful. Recent sales figures do not bode well, suggesting that the GameCube has underperformed at retail, and even fallen short of Nintendo's own conservative predictions. A combination of a crowded hardware market and perhaps an unshakeable brand perception are contributing factors. Certainly, post-European launch, there has been a distinct lack of promotion outside of the traditional gaming press, an advertising

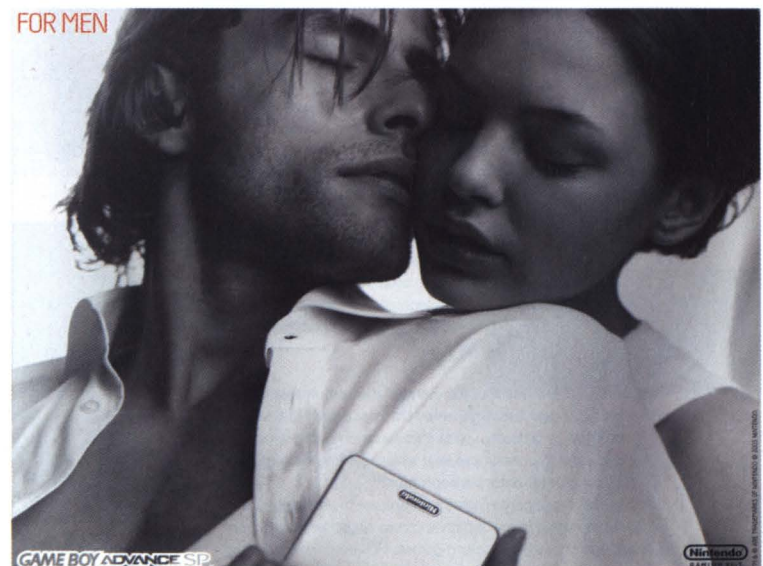
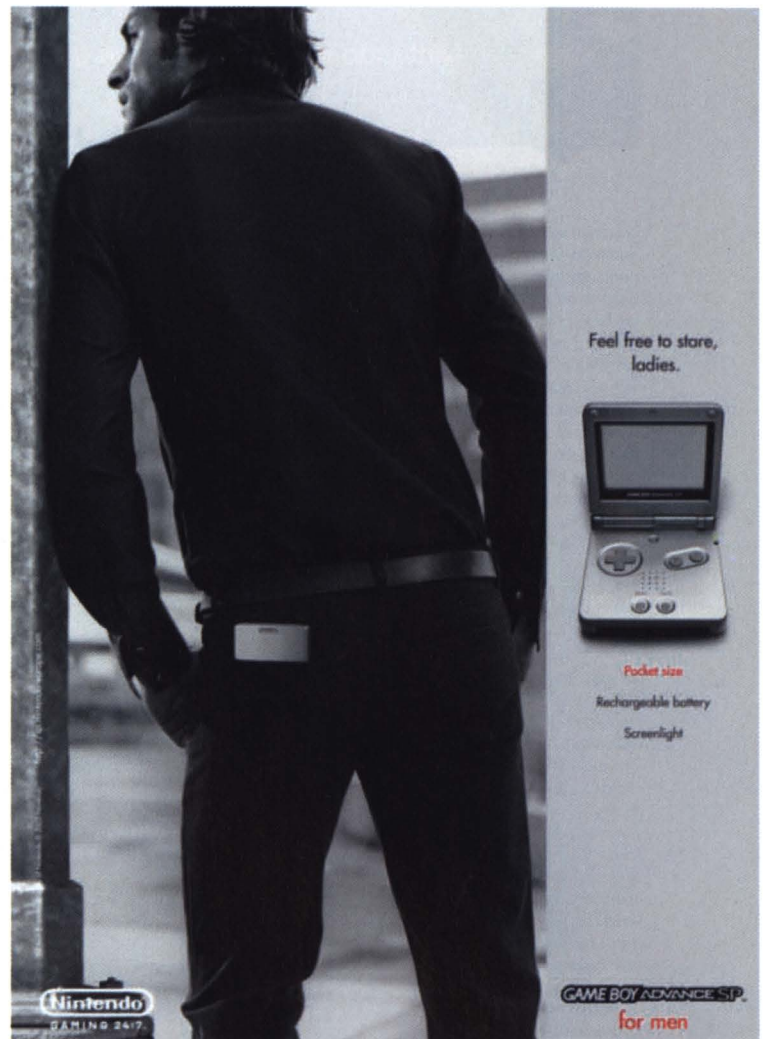
press. Magazines such as 'FHM,' 'The Face' and 'Maxim' carried double-page advertisements for the GBA SP that used the same kind of imagery you'd associate with Calvin Klein fragrances. Black-and-white advertisements, laced with sexual innuendo, clearly wore their intended demographic on their sleeves.

"Eighteen to 30s are not as cynical as their older counterparts," says Greg Clark. "Generally, it's easy to track their trends and, for the most part, stay ahead. But you can't make something cool if it isn't. They can smell advertising bullshit a mile away. They need to be given respect and in return they'll allow you to sell to them."

Strong sales of the GBA SP would suggest that the public has at least partially bought into the notion that Nintendo gaming is indeed an attitude, not an age. Certainly, **Equip** would like to think that the GBA SP is perhaps one step towards redefining the Nintendo brand so that a wider range of consumers will be encouraged to sample the delights of the Kyoto publisher. In these times of creative conservatism, that can only be a good thing.



Continued >



With Game Boy Advance SP, Nintendo boldly eschewed its normal advertising practice in favour of a more lifestyle-orientated aesthetic. The strong take-up of GBA SP suggests the new campaign has been a success



Nintendo reaches for a new generation of gamers

Equip interviews Dawn Paine, Nintendo Europe's marketing controller, to find out how

Nintendo seems to be promoting its products to an older audience, the recent GBA SP print advertisements being particular examples. How successful do you think has this been so far?

We're very happy with the results from our campaigns, which have targeted an older audience. From the outset, and starting with the GameCube launch, we've developed media partnerships with key 'older' brands, such as MTV, which have delivered some really interesting integrated initiatives. With GameCube, we were on the main sponsors for MTV's Winterjam Event and, most recently, with GBA SP we ran a 'Live the life of a rockstar for a day' competition in partnership with them. Additionally, we targeted out-of-home media as a key vehicle and sophisticated print publications such as 'Dazed and Confused' and 'Sleaze Nation' to tap into a more fashion-conscious consumer. To validate the effectiveness of targeting the older audience, we conducted launch-day research into buying behaviour – the average age of the GBA SP purchaser was 25 years old and predominantly male, so this strategy clearly worked.

Do you feel, though, that marketing, say, Game Boy Advance SP to the older, gadget-loving twentysomething consumer may ultimately result in lower sales from Nintendo's younger audience? How is Nintendo addressing that market?

Advertising SP to an older audience represents a massive additional consumer base for Nintendo. This will not cannibalise in any way, but rather bring a whole new kind of gamer into the Game Boy universe. For the younger audience, there is the original Game Boy Advance, and the two consoles essentially mean we have a portfolio covering all ages. The marketing strategy behind the SP was to deliver a premium, fashion-style campaign which positioned SP as a lifestyle accessory as much as a handheld console.

The campaign kicked off with a PR strategy targeting all the key men's lifestyle publications to capture key opinion formers and trendsetters. This was followed by the real brand-building activity, which took the form of the mature print campaign under the campaign tagline 'Game Boy Advance for Men.' The style here was unlike anything Nintendo had ever implemented, and took its cues from men's fashion advertising. An impactful black-and-white double-page print execution demonstrated the beautiful aesthetic of the machine, as well as such key new selling features as the screenlight and the machine's enhanced portability. The campaign is now broadening into much more of a massmarket consideration, with a national six-sheet campaign, advertising in the games press and a cinema campaign running in 'The Matrix Reloaded'.

Across the summer, we'll move towards our 'Entertainment on the Go' strategy for GBA, where we advertise GBA SP in environments where GBA can be used – out of home, in the underground, on buses – and generally targeting people when they have dead time, where GBA SP enables them to play great games anywhere, anytime.

The first few months of the GameCube launch saw titles such as *Rogue Leader*, *Eternal Darkness* and *Resident Evil* promoted by Nintendo. Was this as much about sending out a message to consumers as it was providing Nintendo products for an older demographic?

Certainly, those games helped to reinforce the message that Nintendo has a range of games across all genres, and not just perhaps more kiddie-looking games. However, they're not the single pillar of the games range. Within the last three months, we

have implemented campaigns for titles as diverse as *Metroid Prime* to *Zelda: The Wind Waker*. Ultimately, it's not about the types of games – though, of course, this is important – but equally their jaw-dropping quality and exclusivity.

In what ways have you attempted to differentiate the GameCube from the PlayStation or Xbox brand from a marketing perspective?

At the launch of GameCube, the main brand differentiator was the 'Life's a Game' campaign, which communicated the sense of irreverent fun and simple love of gaming that underpins the Nintendo brand. We didn't aim for a serious or controversial angle, but rather focused on bringing our games to life in a fresh and interesting way through the cube device, which 'captured' the games inside.

Since launch, we've focused more predominantly on what we believe is the core strength of Nintendo: the exclusive games. Hence we've implemented pretty massive campaigns for all our major launches, from *Mario Sunshine* to *Eternal Darkness*, from *Starfox Adventures* to *Metroid Prime*. It's fair that to say that we're now embracing the gaming community in a very big way, and we'll continue to develop an ongoing dialogue with our core fans, the gamers, through some new initiatives coming later in the year. It's important also to mention that, while appealing to an older audience, Nintendo has and will continue to appeal to a younger audience. Again, much of the activity here has been through key partnerships and innovative campaigns with key players in kids media. Pre-Christmas, Cartoon Network developed a three-month campaign comprising TV, print and online with a virtual Nintendo kids' club, and we're now working with Fox Kids for more interactive campaigns.

At launch, David Gosen mentioned that gamers "from eight to 80" would find the GameCube a unique proposition. How does Nintendo market to such a wide range of potential owners?

Given the diversity of our portfolio, marketing from eight to 80-year-olds is always possible! Our games very much work on different levels.

At a superficial level, some of our games with cartoon characters may appeal to kids, but then as older gamers will know, the depth of the gameplay experience will be very much appealing to even hardcore gamers. Yet while we have a range of games to cover all age groups, it's obviously critical that each release gets correct targeting, so each game's marketing will vary.

At one end of the spectrum we have the true definition of a

massmarket title with *Mario Sunshine* and here all the key massmarket tools were employed: a heavyweight TV campaign aimed at kids and 16 to 34-year-olds, heavyweight outdoor advertising on phone boxes, all culminating in a launch day stunt with Desmond Lynam dying his moustache purple!

At the other end of the spectrum we've conducted much more tailored campaigns with titles such as *Metroid Prime*. By contrast, the approach here was more led by print and online advertising, and focused on gaming publications and gaming sites.

Would you say that Nintendo's traditional output, franchises such as *Mario* and *Zelda*, or newer IPs like *Pikmin*, are difficult to market, given the apparent growth in the western world's indifference to non-realistic or non-violent videogaming experiences?

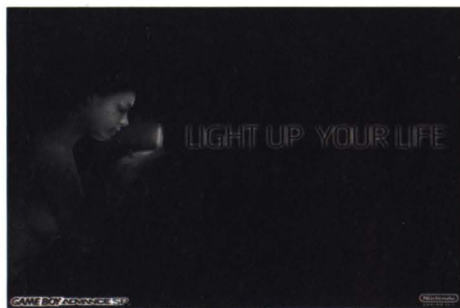
Zelda: The Wind Waker really captures the issue at hand here. At face value, the cel-shaded graphics and colourful environments have courted some controversy, with some cynics feeling the looks would perhaps be offputting to a massmarket fed on a diet of *Vice City* and firstperson shooters. However, the success of this title is testament to the fact that there will always be a place for Nintendo games on any discerning gamers' most-wanted list. From a marketing perspective, core gamers and kids will continue to be key targets, and it's from here that we build positive word of mouth and broaden our message to the massmarket.

Looking forward, will you now rely on individual game title advertising to sell GameCube or will you be marketing the console as a 'brand' in a similar way that you did during the UK launch?

Individual game advertising will continue to a core component of our marketing programme. But we're currently exploring new brand strategies to work alongside the game launches. It's still at the planning stage at the moment, but more news will follow.

How do you believe the public perceives the Nintendo brand today?

You only have to look at the phenomenal success of *Zelda: The Wind Waker* as one gauge to the perennial popularity of Nintendo, selling over 80,000 in the UK in its first weekend sales alone. Quite simply, there is massive public goodwill towards the Nintendo brand. I do think, however, that the maturity of the GBA SP campaign is certainly continuing to change perceptions of the Nintendo brand and broaden its appeal with that very cynical twentysomething audience.



Nintendo's black-and-white print campaign has proved effective in appealing to a new breed of gamer. Slots in magazines such as 'FHM' and 'Dazed and Confused' certainly helped spread its appeal among young men. Some, however, have labelled the creatives "tacky"

a brand apart



Accessorise



Nintendo has succeeded in taking its GBA to the 'lifestyle' sector, but could it ever do the same with GameCube? Or does the machine look too obviously a plaything?



So just what is the perception of Nintendo among today's gamers? **Equip** asked the questions at E3

"Nintendo makes quality videogames"

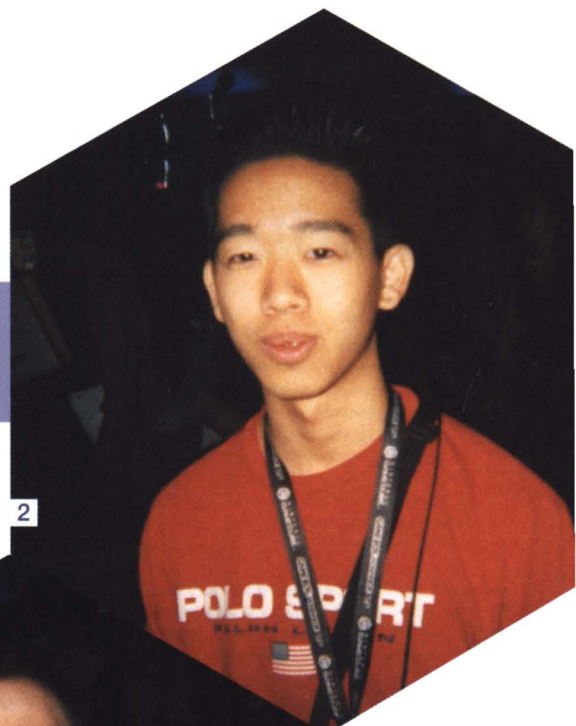
The questions

1. What is your perception of the Nintendo brand?
2. What is your general opinion of Nintendo's games?
3. What do you think Nintendo has to do in order to remain competitive in the face of increased competition?
4. If Nintendo has made a mistake anywhere along the way, what do you think that is?
5. Which new GameCube title are you most looking forward to playing?



1. Bobby Adamides, 27
Computer retailer, NYC

1. "Nintendo is number one for games that don't involve shooting. You'll never see blood in a Nintendo game."
2. "The games are, first and foremost, fun. They also reward dedicated play."
3. "Nintendo need to adopt a harder edge and challenge their image as makers of games for kids."
4. "They've failed to adapt to the older audience."
5. "Mario Kart: Double Dash."



2. Joseph Chen, 18
Game retailer, California

1. "Nintendo is a big player going rapidly downhill."
2. "The Gamecube is a party system, so I pull it out when I have friends around."
3. "Nintendo needs to win big-name exclusives much as Sony has done with *Tomb Raider* and others."
4. "The Gamecube was released too late."
5. "Mario Kart: Double Dash."



3



5



4



6

3. Chris Riseldatl, 21
California

1. "Nintendo makes quality videogames."
2. "The Gamecube's finest titles are classics, and besides I've been playing Nintendo games since I was a kid."
3. "The company just needs to persist with their policy of making brilliant games."
4. "Nintendo couldn't have fared much better against Sony..."
5. "Mario Kart: Double Dash."

4. Melanie Tyson, 22
Game tester, Toronto

1. "Nintendo makes fun, convenient games."
2. "The games are fun and different."
3. "The company shouldn't feel compelled to challenge Sony – it operates in a different market."
4. "Financially, their decision to remain less mainstream has cost them. But long may it continue."
5. "Mario Kart: Double Dash."

5. Hollie Blackman, 20
Game producer, LA

1. "The company is synonymous with cute, kids' games."
2. "Nintendo games are innovative and I can play them with my younger relatives."
3. "Nintendo fare well in Japan, so I think they're doing OK."
4. "The N64."
5. "Giftpia."

6. Francisco Gomez, 24
San Diego

1. "Personally, Nintendo is my favourite games platform."
2. "The games are great – they remind me of being a kid."
3. "They need to get more edgy games out there."
4. "They failed to sign up big-name game heroes and suffered."
5. "F-Zero GX."





Animal Magic

Could *Animal Crossing* be the most grown-up game ever made? Equip goes Johnny Morris with a herd of gyrating fauna to find out

Of course, adult's not the first word that springs to mind. Indeed, at first glance, *Animal Crossing* is the very definition of childish. Gaudy and simplistic, the game provides a charming, colourful playground, devoid of risk and, arguably, excitement. That said, with its 30-year lifespan, it also presents a spectre of senility for today's ageing gamers. The prospect of spending your fifties plodding around, weeding your orchard and collecting writing paper, is a new and

gloomy one. Between these two extremes, however, lies a truer picture of the game, one in which moments of hilarity and horror punctuate the flow, and complexities and subtleties bolster the cutesy charm. *Animal Crossing* is a grown-up game because it's a game for grown-ups.

This isn't 'maturity' in the sense that comes loaded with connotations of gratuitous sleaze and gore – or, indeed, with a specific age group in mind. This is a game built on subtlety and



You never quite know what you'll find as a new day dawns in your village. What May 1, Spring Cleaning Day and clockwork-powered flags have to do with each other, only Nintendo knows

There's no score, no dying, no EXP, no enemies, no way to win and no way to lose. Not that it's ashamed of being a game...

simplicity, a game that encourages patience – words rarely seen in the gaming press. There's no flash to speak of. *Animal Crossing* is utterly confident in its solidity and its quality, and sure enough of its appeal to both children and adults that it feels no need to pander to either.

It's also structurally mature. It does without the fences and finish lines designers traditionally use to shape and drive a game. There's no score, no dying, no EXP, no enemies, no way to win and no way to lose. Not that it's ashamed of being a game – as the loving inclusion of a library of NES classics clearly shows – but it doesn't feel pressured to dress the other elements of life in the village up in 'gamey' clothes.

Not a fashionable formula, for sure, but the game's enormous commercial success overseas has clearly tapped into a hungry and neglected market. Which begs the question: could *Animal Crossing* be the start of a new trend?

Turn back time

The innovations of *Animal Crossing* are well documented – the use of the system clock, the code-trading system – but what's equally striking is just how old-fashioned it all is. The graphics aren't the kind of ambitious, fluid and daring work seen in such cutting-edge releases as *The Wind*

Waker or *Viewtiful Joe*, bizarrely decried as 'cartoony' just because they feature bold swathes of solid colour. No, these are the real deal – spruced up only a little from the game's N64 incarnation. *Animal Crossing* deliberately looks childish, blocky and two-dimensional, and it's so small the GameCube can load the entire thing into memory and play it sans disc.

But in place of overt sophistication are levels of imagination and attention to detail that so few titles can rival. Every one of the several thousand objects in the game is cleverly named and beautifully implemented. Hugh Scully always said that the way to judge the quality of a piece of furniture is to turn it around and look at the back, and *Animal Crossing* bears this out – televisions have tiny vents, clocks have delicate carving, fridges have postcards and magnets... The tone of the game and its visual style are a perfect match for each other. At a time when more and more developers are trumpeting the hyper-realistic, bump-mapped brilliance of their software, *Animal Crossing* has shown that there are still videogaming consumers out there who have a flexible definition of what constitutes 'good' graphics.

Item trading and travelling to other villages may be two of the most appealing aspects of the game, but their implementation could hardly have been lower-tech. By rights, *Animal Crossing* ought to have been dead in the water without online capabilities. Could anything be more cumbersome and antiquated than trading 28 character alphanumeric codes in the playground? Does visiting another





Download the pattern maker to a Game Boy Advance and you can spend your lunch hour creating elaborate designs for the game. You can use these on clothes, umbrellas, flags, signposts, wallpaper and carpets

town really have to require you to physically trudge round to your friend's house, precious memory card in pocket?

Rather than hobbling the game, however, these limitations helped to ensure its success. International communities formed online in days, fuelled by a common need for cherries and butterfly nets: codes flew back and forth, and friendships were formed. By not including online capabilities, Nintendo effectively piggybacked on the 'normal' Internet of email, forums and fansites. As a viral marketing technique, it was a masterstroke. 'Cube owner after 'Cube owner succumbed to the curiosity ignited by the happy babbling of enthusiastic early adopters. Had trading taken place in a closed network within the game, far fewer potential buyers would've encountered tantalising tales of NES games in the post and singing turtles.

If you build it

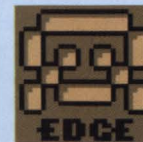
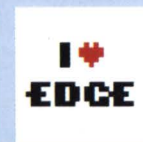
In an age of adaptive AI and complex language parsing, *Animal Crossing*

produces a facsimile of individuality in its NPCs from a hotchpotch of remarkably simple ingredients. Although there are over 200 animal characters in the game, there are only seven recognisable 'types' – four for the males (grouchy, miserable, energetic, lazy); three for the females (nice, neutral and bitchy) – that govern their dialogue and behaviour. For a game supposed to last 30 years, such a limited system runs the risk of monotony.

However, once these characteristics are crossed with a character's appearance, name, wardrobe and décor, surprising subtleties emerge. Even the location of an animal's house – deep in the forest, tucked in a remote corner, down on the beachfront – can add depth to their apparent personae, and trigger a surprisingly strong response: a common submission to gamefaqs.com is the forlorn question 'Is it possible to marry an animal in your village?' Other online diaries chronicle persecutions of hated villagers, complete with systematic Internet beatings, hate mail and trash piled up by their door. It's a system which enables players to draw conclusions from the

DIY insignia

Without online play, *Animal Crossing* must have looked like an odd proposition on paper, considering its fundamental 'communication' motif. And yet, via fansites and forums, the Internet has become an integral part of the mix. In fact, *Edge's* own forum has played home to much *Crossing* activity, including a create-an-*Edge*-related-design challenge. The results speak for themselves...



Saving face

Life in your village may be sunny and safe for the most part, but that makes the horror that lurks within *Animal Crossing* all the more shocking. Losing your data while away 'travelling' robs you of your money, your items – and your face. And psycho-chiller *Eternal Darkness* has nothing on what happens if you meet Mr Resetti for a fatal 14th time...



Even if you have no inclination to exploit their impressive orchestral possibilities, the gyroids and stereos are among the most compulsive collectables in the game. When the rains fall, get out there and dig

slightest coincidences, and which is all the more flexible and sophisticated for it.

The same approach of building up complexity through layers of artful simplicity is evident in the way music is integrated into life in the village. The highlight of the week is Saturday night, when KK Slider comes to play. A hobo hound, radiating blues cool, he plays requests for you and sends you home with a bootleg that you can then play on your own stereo. A lesser game would have re-used the performance track for this recording, but in *Animal Crossing* bootlegs are as flawed as they are in real life. The pale imitations they offer keep you going back on Saturday nights to hear the real deal, even when your song collection is complete.

Got no satisfaction?

Any dissatisfaction with the recordings is short-lived, however. If they sound tinny on the trannie shopkeeper Nook gave you at the start of the game, then upgrade to a grander stereo. Each model has different playback quality – pops and scratches on the gramophone, flat treble on the cheap CD player or warm, full tones on the hi-fi. It's tiny details like these that make acquiring new items in *Animal Crossing* so much more enjoyable than normal. And afterwards you can customise your favourite tune using a few well-chosen gyroids. These are bizarre statues that you can dig out of the ground after rainstorms, and each one produces a distinctive chime, hoot or thump. Set them off while playing a tune and they synchronise to its beat, enabling you to create an extra rhythm track or enjoy endlessly evolving harmonies.

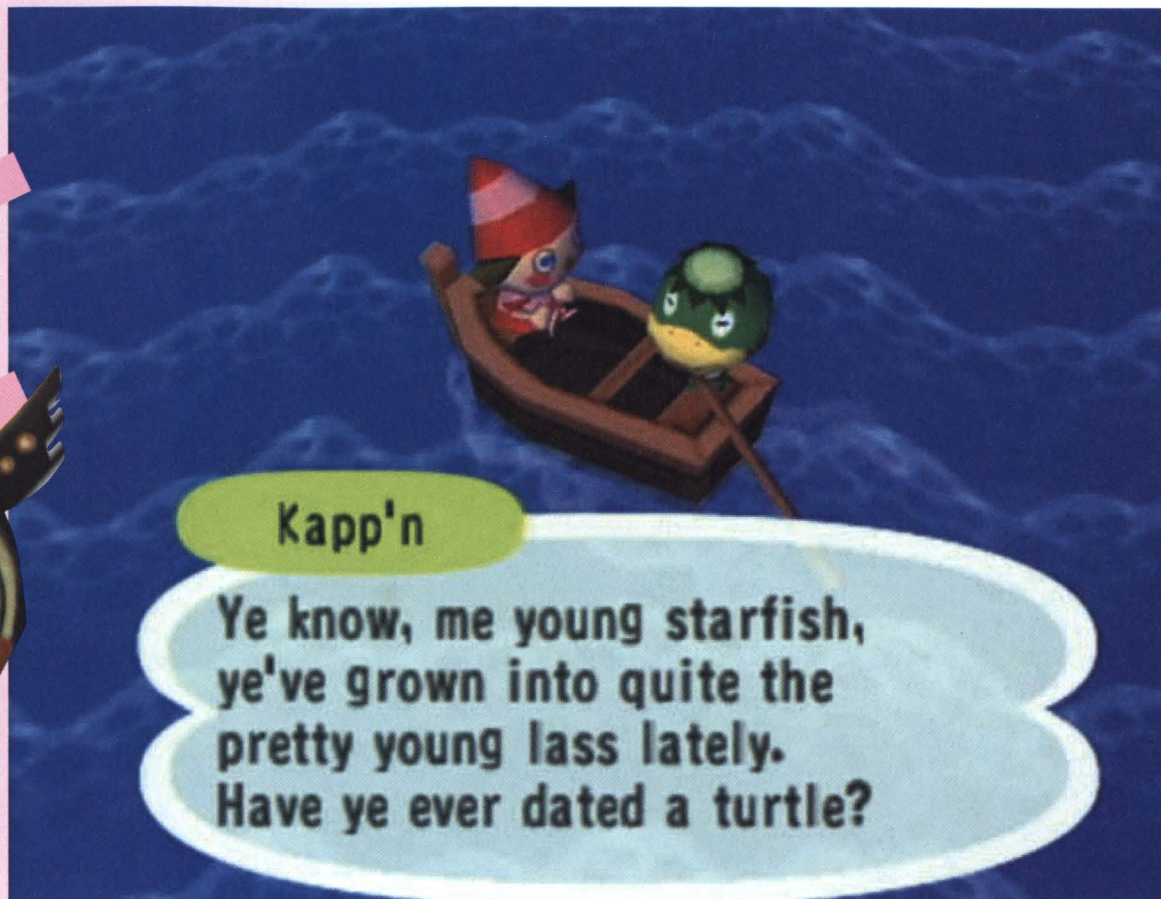
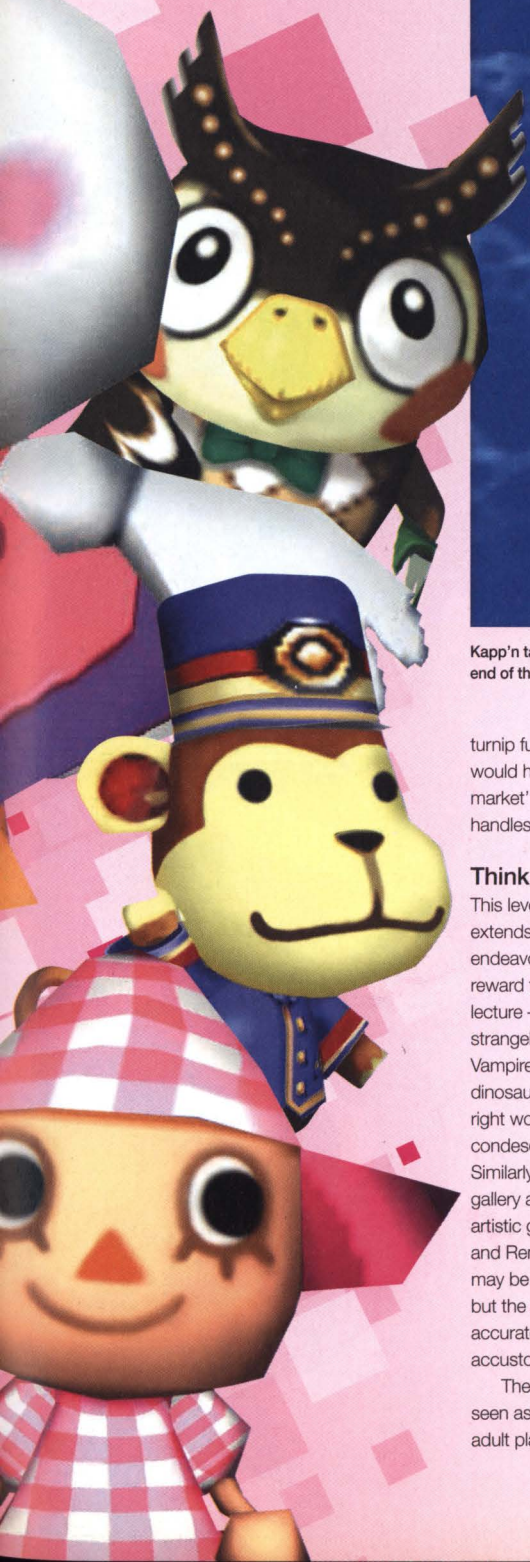
Next, you can compose your town tune, courtesy of the town tune maker, which

gives you four bars of relative creative freedom. Back in your house, you can then play the (hopefully) melodic results of your hard labours on whatever instruments you've been lucky enough to find – vibraphone, piano, electric guitar... As a music creation game, *Animal Crossing* would be dreadful. As an object lesson in how to create longevity and subtlety through attention to detail rather than bland proliferation, it's a stroke of genius.

Not that *Animal Crossing* isn't prolific. There are thousands of lines of dialogue in the game – conversations, natural history lectures, letters, signs and songs. While it's by no means the first game to feature such a volume of text, the sophistication of its wordplay is certainly unrivalled. Almost every screen of text is dotted with puns, gags and unexpected slang. Letters from your mother are laced with sly innuendo, and while Kapp'n's shanties are supposed to be about love and loss, they mostly seem to be about constipation and sex. It's also genuinely funny, that greatest of rarities in videogames. Not many such titles give you the opportunity to play what amounts to a



Whenever you travel to another village, one of your animals hitchhikes a lift and relocates



Kapp'n

Ye know, me young starfish,
ye've grown into quite the
pretty young lass lately.
Have ye ever dated a turtle?

Kapp'n takes a very different tone with boys and girls as he ferries them to the island accessible through GBA link-up – but either sex seems to feel safest at the opposite end of the boat. Equip blames his outrageous behaviour on too many long hours at sea. Or perhaps he's partial to the odd 'medicinal' tippie or two? Grog, probably

turnip futures market, but then no other would have the wit to refer to it as the 'stalk market' or the cheek to call the lady pig who handles your transactions 'Sow Joan'.

Think of the children

This level of linguistic complexity even extends to that most risky of gaming endeavours: daring to be *educational*. Your reward for collecting a complete fossil is a lecture – delivered by an owl who seems strangely reminiscent of Giles from 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' – on the life and times of the dinosaur it belonged to. And reward is the right word – the text is pithy, free of any condescension, and actually interesting. Similarly, the paintings you collect to fill the gallery are tiny replicas of works by such artistic giants as Degas, Toulouse-Latrec and Renoir. The town tune composition tool may be presented as multicoloured frogs, but the basics it teaches are entirely accurate. Even the letter-writing system may accustom tiny fingers to a QWERTY layout.

These kinds of inclusions are traditionally seen as a risk because they can patronise adult players and taint the fun of younger

gamers. Even the youngest children are quick to rumble extra homework dressed up as an awful game, but here the inclusion succeeds because it's unabashed and in context. In a manner strangely reminiscent of Sega's glorious *Typing Of The Dead*, the game manages to make the uncool cool by refusing to sugar coat it, by daring to assume that its players are enthusiastic and genuinely interested.

Indeed, *Animal Crossing* might just be the most parent-friendly game ever. Not

bout of weeding. The shop doesn't open till 9am, so there'll be no begging for a quick go before school, and every game ends with a soothing lullaby that makes bedtime tantrums an impossibility.

Work is paramount

But the parental perks don't end there. The world of *Animal Crossing* isn't quite as saccharine as the screenshots littering these pages might suggest. In many ways, it's colder and harsher than games which

In a manner reminiscent of Sega's *Typing Of The Dead*, the game manages to make the uncool cool by refusing to sugar coat it

since *Mario Paint* has there been a title so utterly blameless and free of corrupting influences. It encourages literacy and creativity and there's no death or sex or swearing. Despite the realtime clock, there's no Tamagotchi tyranny, either. Forget about your village for months at a time and the worst you'll be punished with is a heavy

flaunt their so-called 'maturity'. Most releases that set you tasks dress them up as alluring-sounding 'missions' or world-saving 'quests'. *Animal Crossing* makes no bones about it. "Give me work!" you appeal to a preoccupied frog. "I need a job," you beg a disco gorilla. Why? Because you're labouring under the weight of an exorbitant

Country cousins

The exploitation of Nintendo's legendary reservoir of IP doesn't end with the inclusions of NES games. Many of the rarest items are the kinds of heritage pieces that make up this *Mario* collection, and visitors to your village hint of a wider Nintendo geography that includes Toad Town and Hyrule. The compliment is returned in *The Wind Waker*, where sharp-eyed players may have picked up on the reference to Kapp'n's songs of love and loss on Windfall Island.



If the clock in your GameCube resets, you can end up an accidental time-traveller. Go too far and your village can become a weedy ghost-town with nothing but the sound of your own spade for company

mortgage. An *Animal Crossing* day is backbreaking and mundane. You weed and dig. You run paperboy errands for ungrateful villagers. To pay off your final mortgage, you'd have to lug 3,500 peaches to the shop, 15 at a time.

Be a drudge

This sense of capitalist misery pervades other aspects of the game, too. The sisters who run the tailor's shop have to keep it open until 3am every day, presumably to

find in contemporary videogaming. All this doesn't make gameplay demoralising, though, mostly because in *Animal Crossing* any effort you make is always well rewarded. In a world of badly paid jobs and unappreciated grind, this offers a chance to play at working in an environment where jobs are, for once, charmingly implemented, soothingly repetitive and predictably remunerative.

The corollary is true, however. Most children are used to being put on the spot:

Capitalist misery pervades other aspects of the game – the sisters who run the tailor's shop have to keep it open until 3am every day

meet the cost of equipment hire from Tom Nook, the ultimate scrooge. When Sahara the carpet-seller comes to town from 'the East', the villagers make veiled allusions to the distance she's had to walk in order to make money to take back to 'her people'. It's as close to a satire on the morality of the Western consumption of imported luxury goods as you're likely to

write a story, draw a picture, sing a song! But many adults suffer a fit of stage fright when met with similar demands in *Animal Crossing*. While the game has no way of judging your efforts, most players feel pressured to make a considerable creative effort when asked. One of your earliest tasks is to write advertising copy for Tom Nook's shop. Fully half of the *Animal*





Crossing playing members of **Edge's** forum independently felt the urge to do so in rhyme. The pattern maker is a simple tool that enables elaborate effects, and players' determination to take full advantage of it eventually led to the development of a bespoke software tool (<http://proth.bravepages.com/anicrodesapro/index.html>). This is play elevated to the status of work, and all the more satisfying for it.

On the shoulders of giants

So will the game ever see a PAL release? It seems highly unlikely. Although rumours continue to circulate of an Australian version, NOE's announcements on the matter have ranged from the vague and contradictory to the downright bizarre. The American release was first heralded as a test. Then Europe was promised *Doshin the Giant* 'instead'. Then came the suggestion that the release of *Animal Crossing* was dependent on *Doshin* selling well. The failure to release the game in Europe has alienated many GameCube owners, including the 4,000 who signed a petition campaigning for the game's release.

However, the task of localisation is not to be underestimated. The sheer volume (as well as the formidable complexity) of the



'Universal' item codes are freely available on the Internet for those eager to acquire them. But would a free blue dresser be enough to tempt you to utter this kind of profanity (above left) to Tom Nook?



text would make a high-quality, multilingual translation a daunting job. Coupled with the regional nature of the festivals and events that make up the game's calendar, *Animal Crossing* was never likely to make a speedy appearance this side of the Atlantic. Still, *Animal Crossing 2* is rumoured for a release later this year, and **Equip** would be sorely amazed if this wasn't brought across.

What not to wear

At a time when Nintendo is working hard to emphasise its adult appeal, as shown in the advertising campaign for the Game Boy Advance SP, *Animal Crossing* demonstrates another way forward. Here is a game that is all the things received

wisdom says a successful game shouldn't be: graphically old-fashioned, peripheral-dependent, squarely aimed at children, without multiplayer modes and resolutely offline. And yet it's also all those things that developed Nintendo's reputation over the lives of its earlier consoles: innovative, excellently executed, and mature in a more fundamental sense than the sex, drugs and shock 'n' awe offered by other 'adult' titles.

While the sleek refinement of the SP, and of games such as *P.N.03*, cultivate the older, cooler market to which Nintendo continually aspires, the company faces a dark horizon indeed if it abandons the childish delight that helped make it what it is today.



- 040 F-Zero GX
- 044 Mario Kart: Double Dash
- 048 Pikmin 2
- 050 Wario World
- 052 Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg
- 054 Star Fox 2
- 056 Rogue Squadron: Rebel Strike
- 058 Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles
- 060 Kirby Air Ride
- 061 1080° Avalanche

GameCube's Top Ten

Hundreds of games will be released on GC throughout its lifetime. **Equip** previews the highlights from the near future



044

054

In the last issue of **Equip**, dedicated to PlayStation2, we identified *Enter The Matrix* as one of the key forthcoming titles on the machine. And Infogrames' movie crossover went on to make its way into an unbelievably high number of videogamers' homes. So, in a sense, picking it out within these pages made a strange kind of sense — although, with the benefit of hindsight, it's clear that the sparks of promise it showed when **Equip** viewed the title did not ultimately add up to a satisfying whole. Far from it, in fact.

When it comes to incoming GameCube software, it's a little easier to pick out titles with confidence, chiefly because Nintendo itself is responsible for some of the key examples. And in this issue the company's titles are backed up by the efforts of such companies as Sega, SquareSoft and Treasure, each with reputations for coming up with the finished goods.

Which is not to say that any of the games over the forthcoming pages are guaranteed, bona fide classics in the making. Indeed, **Equip**'s experiences with *Mario Kart: Double Dash*, in particular, present a couple of question marks (something that isn't helped, obviously, by the game's super-high profile).

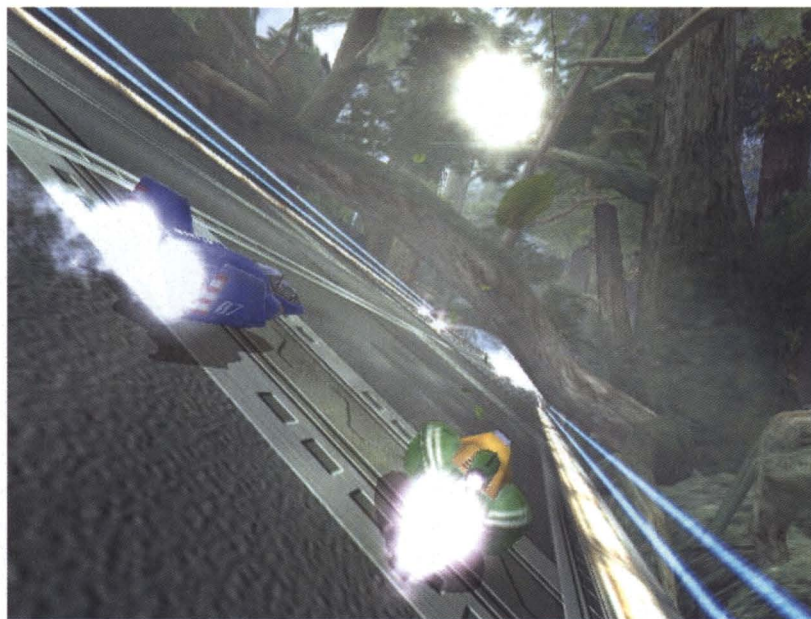
But with all of these games the ingredients are there, whether it's developer track record or intellectual properties. As always, of course, you'll need to see the eventual, final code reviewed in **Edge** to see how they all work out.



F-Zero GX

Will Toshihiro Nagoshi's futuristic racer be worth the wait?

Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: Sega (Amusement Vision) ■ Release: August (US), TBC (UK)



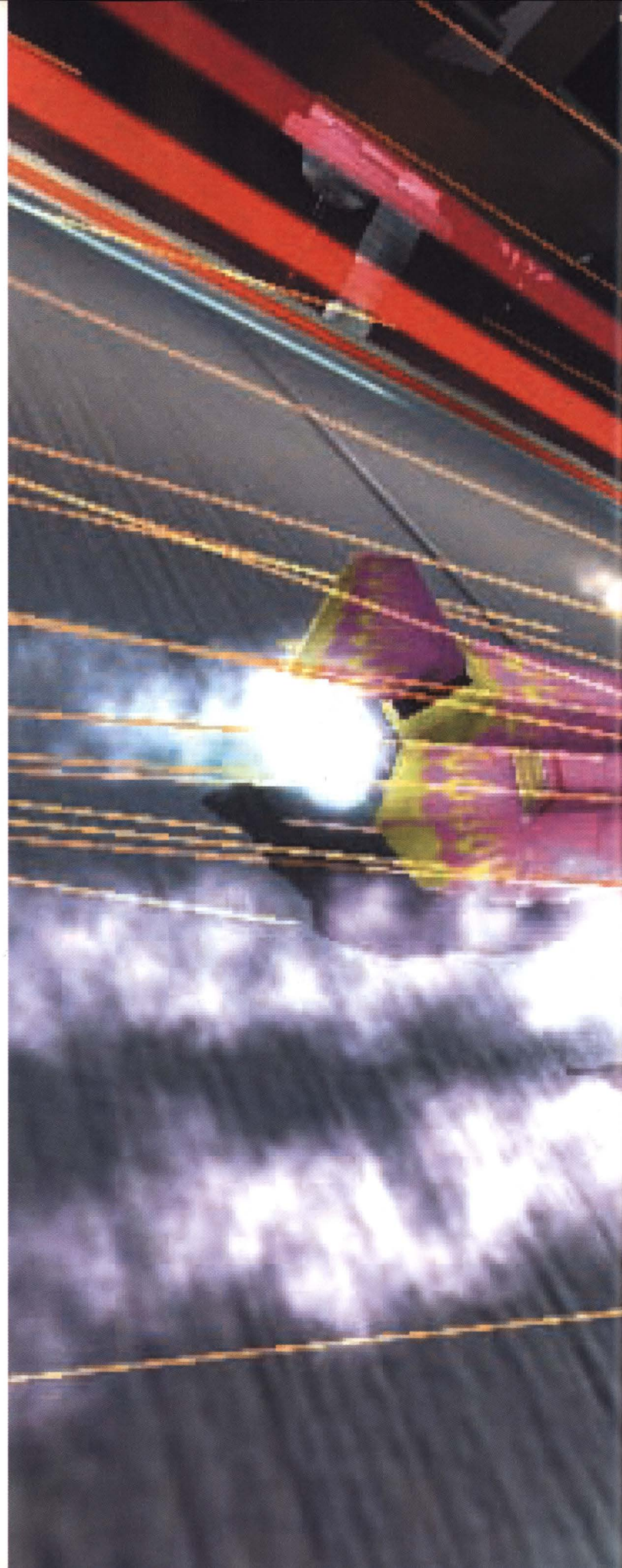
The original SNES game's vehicles make it into the GameCube update, albeit with a serious makeover. Chances are, however, that you'll be too busy keeping your craft in one piece at extreme velocities to notice minor details

Speed never looked so fast on-screen. In fact, *F-Zero GX* is a spectacularly quick twitch test that represents the diametric opposite of GameCube's other, more pedestrian-paced racing hope, *Double Dash*.

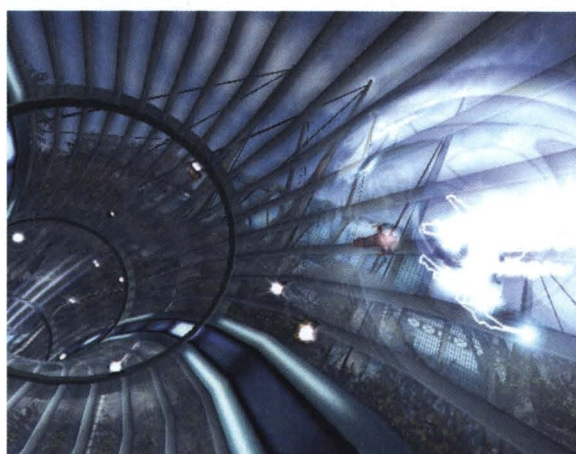
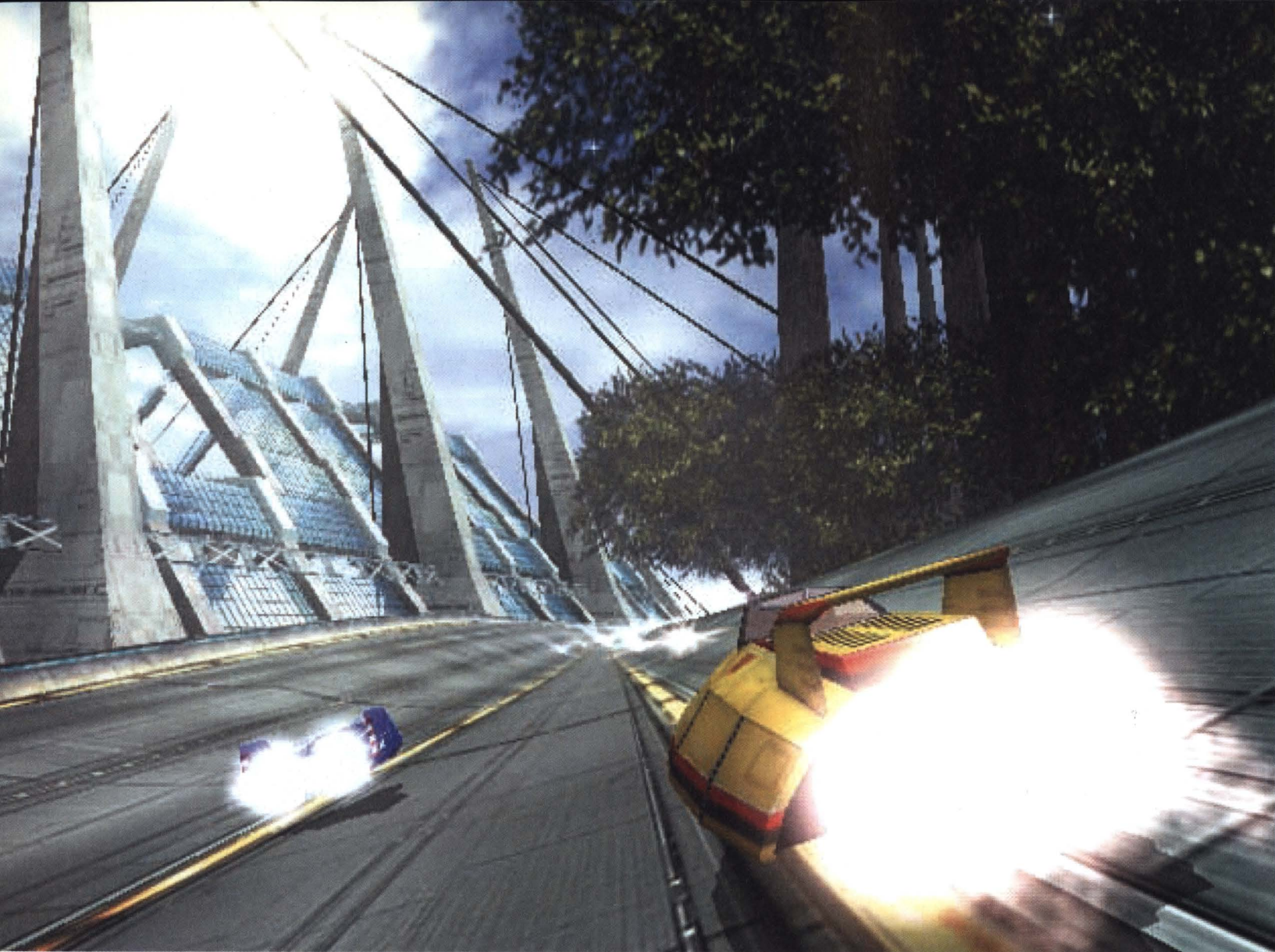
What the pure speed means is that negotiating the 20 complex, tortuous tracks is a considerable challenge – especially since dropping off at any point will result in instant retirement from the race. This aspect has been a staple of the *F-Zero* series, but it may serve to dissuade newcomers. With up to 30 vehicles racing at any one time, the frantic jostling for position combined with the potential for vast speeds will already be piling an awful lot on to players' plates. Learning courses will be the overwhelming necessity for Sega's new racer.

At last month's E3, a playable version of *F-Zero GX* was on display offering a choice of six craft and four tracks. Each of

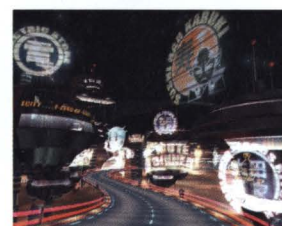
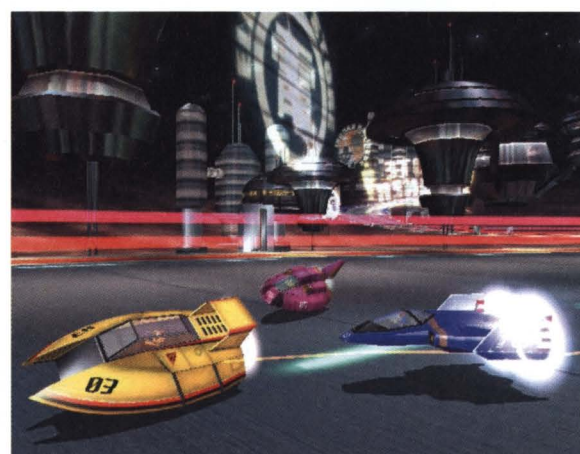
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Cylindrical sections (above) encourage players to really let fly – although the most spectacular line isn't necessarily the most effective one. Turbo boosts deliver a level of speed that is simply breathtaking





The game's many circuits feature a distinctly industrial feel, although Amusement Vision has lined them with a number of visual touches to make longtime game fans smile, including a *Daytona*-esque fruit machine and a giant R.O.B. building



the environments demonstrated the developer's decision to ensure that the game relentlessly throws players around – upside down, vertically up and down, around cylindrical racing towers, and off a number of drops and ramps that make up the often multi-tiered tracks.

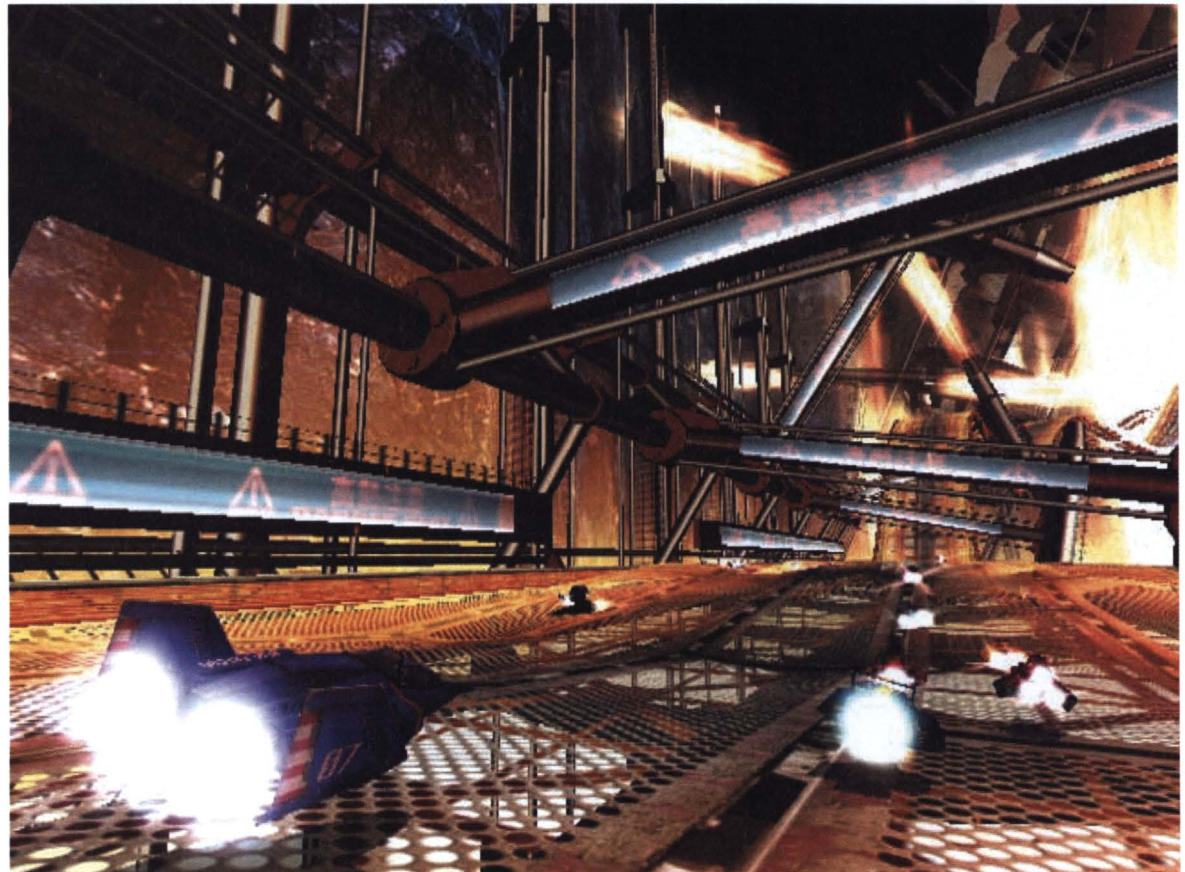
Combined with the massive scale of the sprawling cities that *F-Zero GX* takes as its backdrop, these elements create the illusion of complexity, even though, at its heart, *GX* is a simple game.

Of course, several key elements return from the series, such as hunting for speed boosts, but the singleplayer Story mode which follows the fortunes of Captain Falcon and the 29 other competing pilots remains a tour of the tracks.

Far more interesting is the ability to win new parts and consequently build bespoke craft. Up to 8,000 unique racing combinations are promised as cockpits, bodies and boosters – which affect cornering, speed and the strength of your hovercar – can be welded together in the Customise mode. Yet many of these will doubtless rely on *F-Zero GX*'s compatibility with its coin-op stablemate, *F-Zero AX*. An ambitious and innovative concept, players of the Gamecube version will be able to download customised vehicles to a memory card for later upload to the arcade cabinet. Sought-after parts from winning vehicles will subsequently be downloaded from the arcade cabinet, allowing for use on the GameCube unit.

For those GC owners disinterested in anything other than their console, however, the game appears to promise enough. As well as the Story mode, Practice, Replay, Grand Prix, Time Attack, Versus Battle and Customise modes are all promised. The multiplayer aspect supports up to four in splitscreen, and despite the graphics engine having to deal with astonishing levels of speed, it copes well in twoplayer mode without too much detail loss – only resorting to a featureless track and minimal background in fourplayer.

Thematically, the environments deliver the kind of near- and far-future landscapes



synonymous with the series. Tracks such as Mute City, Port Town, Green Plant, Vegas Palace, Lightning and Aeropolis therefore span shiny techno, gritty industrial, and dense foliage-covered areas. No surprises, then, but all oozing laudable attention to detail should there be a split second spare to take in the scenery.

After the N64's take on the series was ignored by many – thanks in part to fairly minimalist, if vibrant, visuals – Nintendo must be hoping that *GX* can recall the halcyon days of the SNES's *F-Zero*, a game which at the time used the capable hardware to jaw-dropping effect.

Potentially of more concern is the fact that futuristic racers may have passed their sell-by date; an anachronism in the current

Players of the GameCube version will be able to download customised vehicles to memory card for later upload in the arcade

realism-obsessed gaming zeitgeist that has propelled the likes of *Gran Turismo* and *Project Gotham Racing* into gamers' 'most wanted' lists. There's no doubt then that *F-Zero GX* has a lot to prove, and that there's a lot at stake for Nintendo.

Whatever happens, it's certain that GC gamers' need for speed will be well catered for. *F-Zero GX* may have been a long time in development, but the result is hardly tardy. Followers of *Edge*'s AV Out column will not be surprised.



Mario Kart: Double Dash

In simple terms: the GameCube title everyone's been waiting for

■ Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: In-house ■ Release: November (US), TBC (UK)



Nintendo has resurrected tracks, including Wario Stadium (above), from previous *Mario Kart* games, but given them significant overhauls, as you'd expect. The kart designs themselves, however, are new and distinctive

The latest iteration of Nintendo's driving series is shaping up to be a classy sequel, offering another helping of the simple mechanics and furious action of the previous *Mario Karts*.

The biggest change in gameplay derives from the fact that two characters can occupy each kart: one drives while the other is responsible for deploying the customary range of weapons. You control both at once and can switch their seating positions with a simple button press.

You can choose to combine any two of the 16 available characters. The roster is predictable enough, taking in all the old favourites including Bowser, Yoshi, Mario and Luigi, but for the first time in the series a selection of unlockable characters will also be available as you progress.

Two sizes of vehicle appear for selection in order to accommodate small characters such as Diddy Kong and Baby Mario plus the larger frames of the likes of

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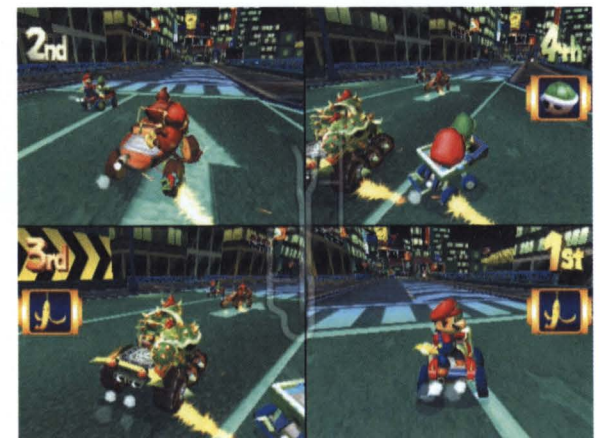
mario kart: double dash

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The game has a visual feel reminiscent of 'Wacky Races', although it doesn't offer super-telescopic suspensions. Instead, you'll get one over on the opposition via cunning use of weapons and power-ups. Stealing them from other racers is positively encouraged





Take away the gloss of the new graphics and you're left with a gaming experience that is reminiscent of the previous title

Bowser and Donkey Kong. Naturally, the smaller characters cannot drive the larger vehicles and vice versa, although medium-sized racers, such as Mario and Luigi, can use either type.

Disappointingly, the physics of your ride are not determined by the combined characteristics of your drivers and kart. Instead, the weight and capabilities of your vehicle alone determine how well you can corner, your acceleration, and your top speed. This may keep things simple, but it does preclude a key tactical factor.

Care has been taken to ensure that tactics do play a big part in *Double Dash*, however. For starters, each character carries an item unique to them, which is activated by moving into the 'rear-gunner' position. You can also pick up a familiar bevy of weapons, including lightning attacks and turtle shells. In a welcome touch, you can use character switching as a basic inventory system as one person holds on to an item while he drives, which allows for tactical deployment.

When you've chosen to race in one of the three standard classes – 50cc, 100cc or 150cc – you'll find that many of the track themes have been lifted from the previous *Mario Karts*, although each has been revised and made more complex.

There are other, more central modifications to gameplay. The mini-jumps of the original *Kart* are absent, as is the powerslide from the N64 version. Instead, cornering is undertaken in a manner more familiar to a traditional rally game.

There are, of course, various new manoeuvres which develop the non-racing aspect of a game that is as much about tit-for-tat with your fellow racers as it is about crossing the finish line first. If you don't have a weapon on board, for instance, you can run up alongside an opponent, lean across, and grab theirs.

One action that is still being refined, and therefore remains under wraps, is a dodge manoeuvre. Your rear end may be vulnerable to attack, but Nintendo assures *Equip* that you'll be able to see incoming

projectiles in just enough time to pull off an evasive move.

Take away the gloss of the new graphics and you're left with a gaming experience that is highly reminiscent of the previous title. In other words, the core appeal of karting with Nintendo's stable of familiar characters seems mostly in place.

But a title such as *Mario Kart: Double Dash* is difficult to truly judge after only a short period of play – which is all *Equip* was able to snatch at E3, where the game drew the lion's share of attention on Nintendo's stand. There can, after all, be few graduates of the original SNES *Super Mario Kart* who didn't initially balk at the N64 update, only to later appreciate that it was a great racing game in its own right, albeit strictly on its own terms.

But there's one thing the GameCube update is assured of, and that's multiplayer appeal. With support for up to eight simultaneous racers via two linked consoles, it could turn out to be the ultimate party game.



Pikmin 2

Nintendo once more explores realtime strategy – minus the tanks

Publisher: Nintendo Developer: In-house Release: TBC



It can be difficult to succinctly sum up the appeal of Nintendo gaming, trickier still to capture the reason why the company enjoys such loyalty from its fans without rambling on about great games, unforgettable protagonists, recalled youth...

One simple keynote of the company's success has been a determination to innovate, even when following up a successful title. Enter *Pikmin 2*.

The original *Pikmin* (7/10, E105) represented a blueprint for Miyamoto's vision of the future of realtime strategy. It's a leisurely puzzle game centred on the management of hordes of sprouting creatures and the prioritisation of tasks. The sequel is a revision of that sketch. You no longer battle against a timer, so *Pikmin*'s legendary lack of urgency is exacerbated.

That's not the only evidence that this is definitely a sequel. You can now switch between controlling Olimar and his assistant, allowing you to multitask even more, potentially doubling the complexity of each level. The longevity of the title too has been addressed with randomly generated underground dungeons forming the backdrop to a significant wedge of the game.

The mechanics of gameplay remain the same: grow creatures from seed through three stages of development then set them off battling enemies, battering plants and collecting items. Now, though, your motivation is financial as you bid to rescue Olimar's company from bankruptcy.

Certainly the most significant gameplay change in evidence so far is the inclusion of a two-player option. You can now play

cooperatively in a splitscreen mode or go head to head with a rival doodad collector.

The steps on which *Pikmin 2* is likely to founder or else o'erleap, however, are the new flavours of Pikmin: a little bog-eyed white type and a fat purple variety. Trouble is, Nintendo has yet to reveal what special powers these chaps will have, so it's hard to predict how they'll effect gameplay.

Mathematically, at least, the number of specialised creatures has almost doubled, so chances are the final game will feel like a sufficient departure from the original to warrant full sequel status.

Although there exist some concerns over general graphical quality (particularly in the underground sections), *Pikmin 2* will no doubt find favour with those to whom the original critters so thoroughly endeared themselves.



Pikmin devotees will be pleased to see that the game's many environments look as organic as they did in the original. As you'd expect, the twoplayer mode delivers an entirely new dimension

Wario World

Introducing the ultimate anti-*Sunshine* experience...

■ Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: Treasure ■ Release: June



You can picture the scene. The creatives at Treasure file into their boardroom and settle into plush leather thinking chairs to discuss their next game. It's going to be a platform game, they decide, or a 3D adventure at least. And it will star Wario, so it's got to remain true to the brutish spirit of the protagonist and provide an antidote to the cheeriness of *Mario Sunshine*. But how do you convey Wario's grumpy demeanour through sufficiently engaging game dynamics? Answer: make *Wario World* – a brash, aggressive and relentlessly pacey adventure full of violent encounters.

In fact, the game at first appears to be a straight platformer, but it soon becomes apparent that it is more of a scrolling beat 'em up as you attack an incessant wave of multiple villains. As well as a range of hand

and feet attacks, plus wrestling-style throws, Wario can use scenery, such as ornamental columns, to batter enemies.

That's not to say *Wario World* is devoid of the kind of neat platform innovations that set apart many GameCube adventures from those of its rivals. Knock out some creatures, for instance, and you can pick up their prone bodies and use them to repeatedly scuff a wheel which in turn opens a gate. Neat.

The snarling motivation for Wario's crusade through a string of bright levels is to reunite his collection of precious gems which had been magically transformed into all manner of monsters.

As *Wario World* remains a platformer at heart, the imperative to collect coins and other pick-ups is still central to the gameplay. Collecting enough pieces allows

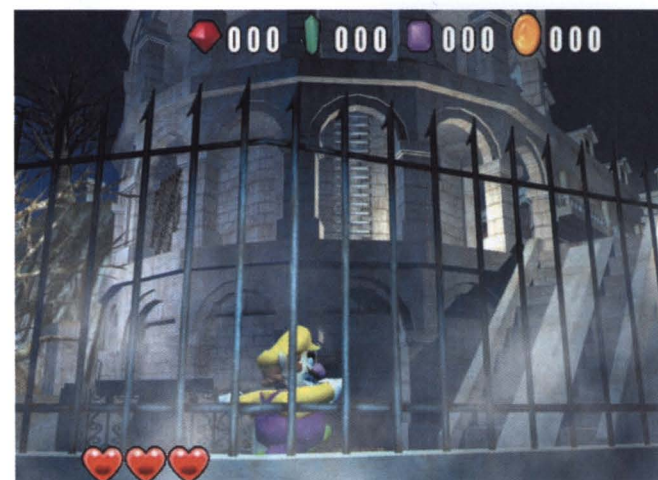
you to achieve extra lives and prolong the playing experience. What's more, grabbing all eight of the special treasures dotted about each level will allow you to download a string of *Wario Ware* mini-games to your Game Boy Advance.

There's no doubting the impetus in this game. From the word go you are thrust into battle and you're given little time to collect your thoughts before you're hammering at a boss or a group of irate opponents. The action is a pretty straightforward case of hammering the action buttons to batter your enemies, making *Wario World* a balls-out brawler minus the guns and blood.

You may have expected something a little more sophisticated from Treasure, but the game does manage to throw up its share of surprises.



Wario World



As you can probably tell from the less-than-complex level designs, the action is far removed from the picky platforming fare of *Super Mario Sunshine*. Instead, Wario concentrates on smacking enemies in his quest to recover his lost treasure. Typically for a Treasure title, these come in all manner of guises (left). Lighting is used to create atmosphere (above)

Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg

Yuji Naka's Sonic Team prepares to give birth to an odd new actioner

■ Publisher: Sega ■ Developer: In-house (Sonic Team) ■ Release: TBC



Clearly young Hatcher has a thing for all things ovoid, something that goes right down to his unusual choice of costume

Yuji Naka created a videogame icon in Sonic The Hedgehog and has been long revered for that achievement. Given his undoubted flair for character creation, then, it's surprising to note that Naka-san and his team have failed to create an original platform protagonist since the mid-'90s. Until now.

The latest hero from the Sonic Team studio is a boy dressed in a chicken suit named Billy Hatcher – a fortunate moniker for a lead character in a platforming adventure centred on an individual's pursuit of world peace and lots of eggs.

The ovoids Hatcher collects aren't simply tokens of success awarded for pulling off well-timed leaps and reaching hidden areas, they're fundamental to the mechanics of the game. You can throw them at enemies, bounce on them to

reach inaccessible platforms and even roll on them to speedily navigate the levels.

Eggs are not inanimate objects, however, so it's no surprise that they can also be hatched if you collect enough of the food dropped by your crushed enemies. Each foodstuff will create different offspring, so select which of the 30-odd creatures will prove most helpful in the next puzzle before you bawl at the egg and watch impatiently as the little blighter blinks into the world.

There's no sign yet of the promised fourplayer mode, but the quality in engaging, colourful design which marks out Naka's work is already in evidence. There are also a few nods to classic Sonic action, particularly in the way Billy moves when rolling around the level grasping an egg, just like a tight little ball of hedgehog.

At the heart of the game is familiar structure, however. Each mission-based escapade into the world is punctuated with a boss battle. In other words, this is shaping up to be a platform game with classic resonances as you battle through a familiar collection of precarious runways, platforms and gurning baddies.

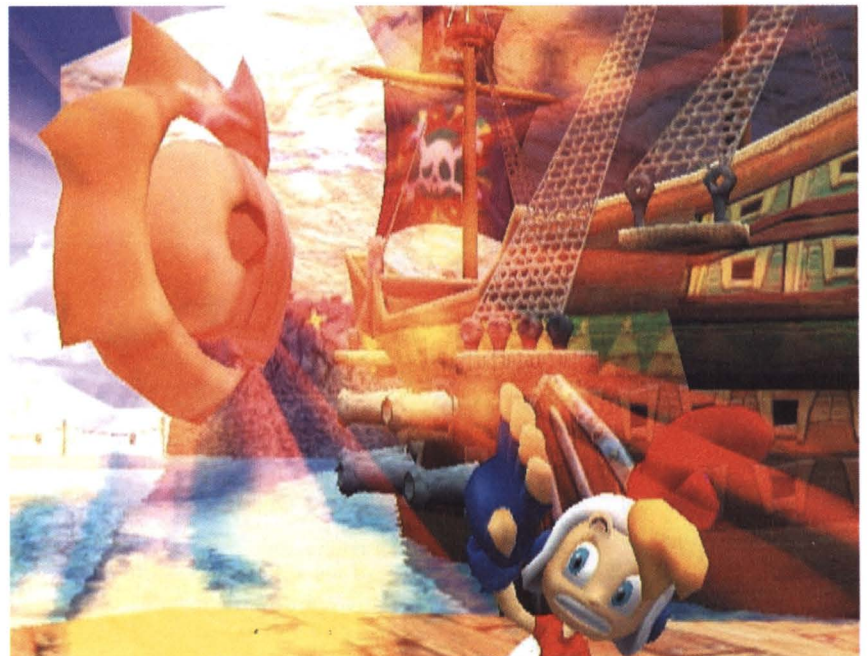
Exploration is encouraged and rewarded in customary Naka-san style with extra pick-ups and shortcuts, so gameplay promises to be less linear than your average platform game.

Sega's support of GameCube has so far been nothing less than admirable, and it's heartening to see an exclusive title emerging from a studio as capable as Sonic Team. It represents no especially new or brave direction, but the broad of mind may not care.





Rolling eggs is all part of a day's work, but you can also bounce on them to reach higher areas and use them as projectiles against enemies. More importantly, though, eggs can be nurtured and hatched to give birth to over 30 different types of creature, each with its own unique nuances



Star Fox 2

Or, alternatively, Furry Animals In Space: The Return

Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: Namco/Nintendo ■ Release: TBC



Namco is making much of the multiplayer mode in its forthcoming *Star Fox* sequel, which certainly represents an engaging experience in its current form. There is a danger, however, that the development team is placing too much emphasis on a deathmatch subgame that is unlikely to inspire players long accustomed to genre offerings in the PC space. Except, of course, there's a twist...

For those who've have played *Star Fox 2* (which is only a working title), the key topic of discussion thus far has been the unique control system, which sees you hitting run on 'R' and then tweaking the analogue stick and the 'L' trigger to manoeuvre sideways. The method is certainly unconventional, but it successfully generates an impetus as you feel

compelled to grasp the pad in the intensity of the action. As a result, you're constantly careering around the screen in a ceaseless dance of death reminiscent of the 'catch-me-if-you-can' tactics deployed by the best *Quake* and *Unreal* players.

Familiar ships and weaponry populate the game to date, although a string of new additions are expected in the final version.

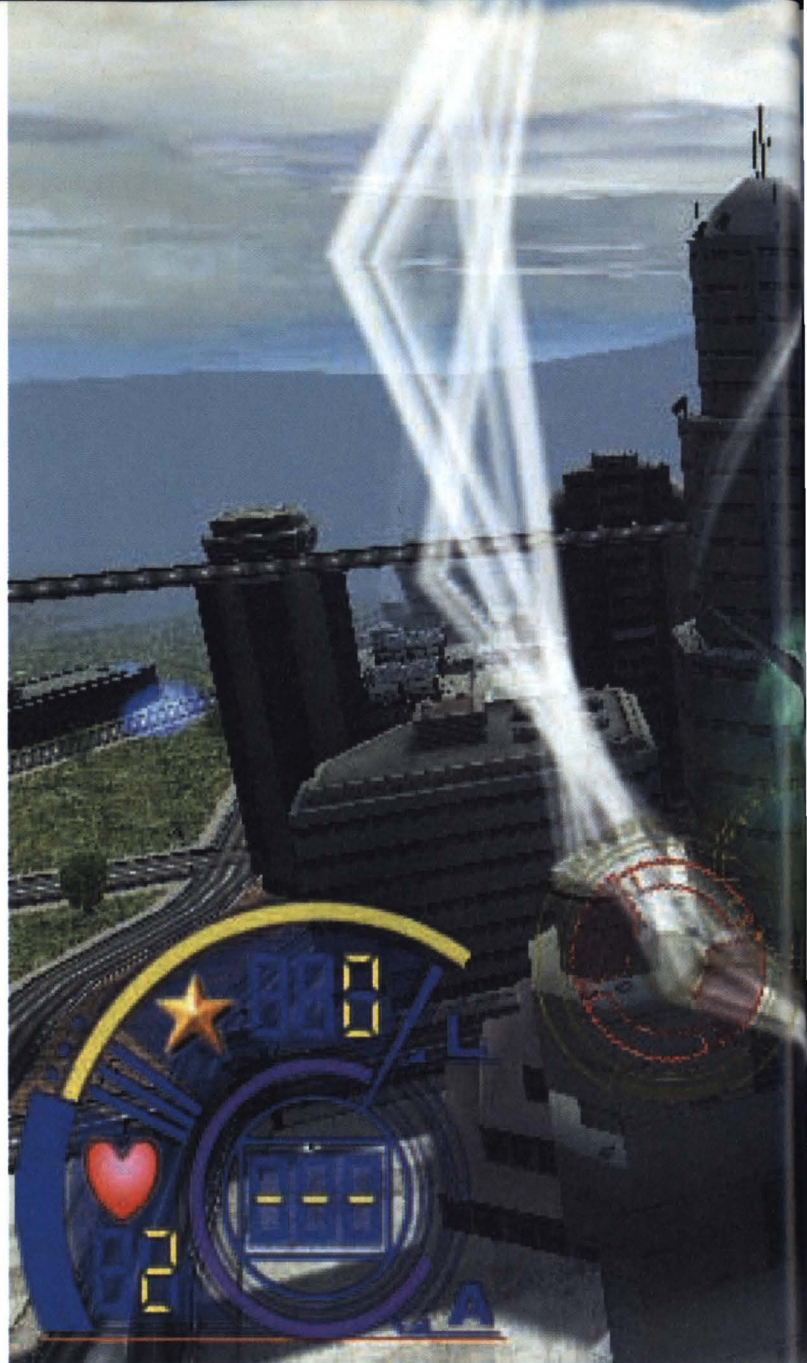
There is already evidence of a new move towards more liberated gameplay. You can now, for instance, climb out of the cockpit of your ship and wingwalk, firing off salvos at your rivals who are cowering behind the buildings below. Details are scant on the story mode of the game as Namco proved reluctant to show it off at the recent E3.

There will be a cooperative mode allowing up to four players to command

Team *Star Fox* members including Fox McCloud, Slippy Toad, Peppy Hare and Falco Lombardi from the first game as well as a cast of unannounced extras.

Fans of *Star Fox Adventures* (of which there must be some) have no doubt already glanced at the screenshots on these pages and concluded that this is not the prettiest-looking GameCube title yet, and that's true. And it's clear that *Star Fox 2* is designed primarily for group play, so those still basking in the glory of their 535th consecutive solo deathmatch victory may be disappointed.

Nintendo sorely needs each of its updated properties to be as sparkling as possible – a fact referenced elsewhere in this issue of **Equip** – so there's little doubt that more polish will be applied to Fox McCloud's latest before it ships.





Piloting highly manoeuvrable Arwing ships are the focus of airborne dogfights, but, in a curious twist, on-foot gameplay is an important part of the game. Namco has clearly looked to other multiplayer titles for its inspiration, a fact that has influenced its choice of varied weaponry

Rebel Strike

Feel the Force once more – but this time with more familiar faces

Publisher: LucasArts ■ Developer: Factor 5 ■ Release: TBC



With game tie-ins from Episodes I and II receiving only lukewarm reactions, it's little surprise that LucasArts has once again turned to the 'classic' 'Star Wars' trilogy for inspiration. No surprise either that it has chosen the proven team at Factor 5 – responsible for the most successful 'Star Wars' gaming franchise of recent years (*Rogue Squadron*) – to create another GC-exclusive space combat sim.

While last year's *Rogue Leader* was a graphically sumptuous but ultimately fairly shallow shooter, *Rebel Strike* promises a more sophisticated show.

Drawing on the familiar cinematic themes of Episodes IV to VI, it blends high-speed aerial dogfighting with more innovative ingredients this time around. The famous Endor speederbike sequence

from 'The Empire Strikes Back' is simulated, as well as missions that involve piloting AT-STs, tauntauns, and even some played out on foot as Han Solo, Luke Skywalker and Wedge Antilles.

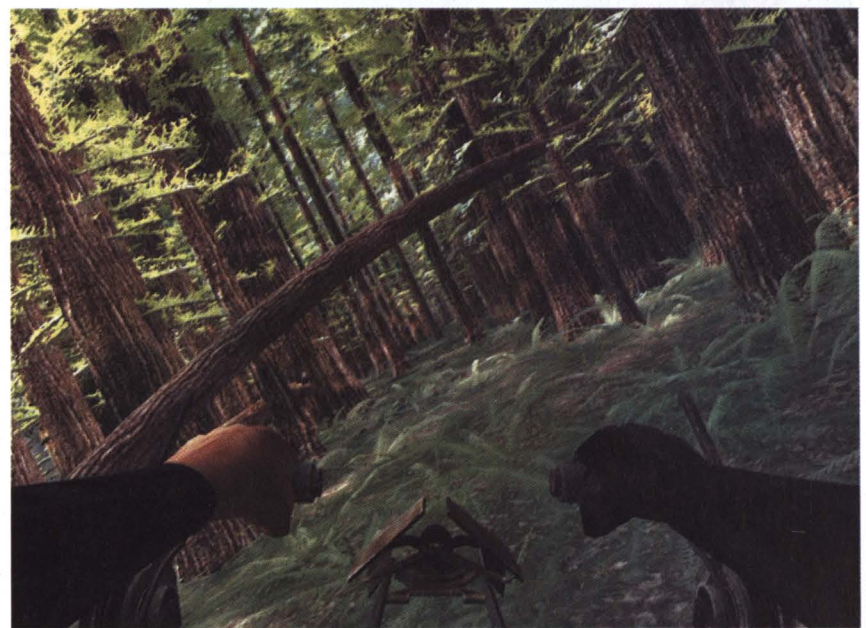
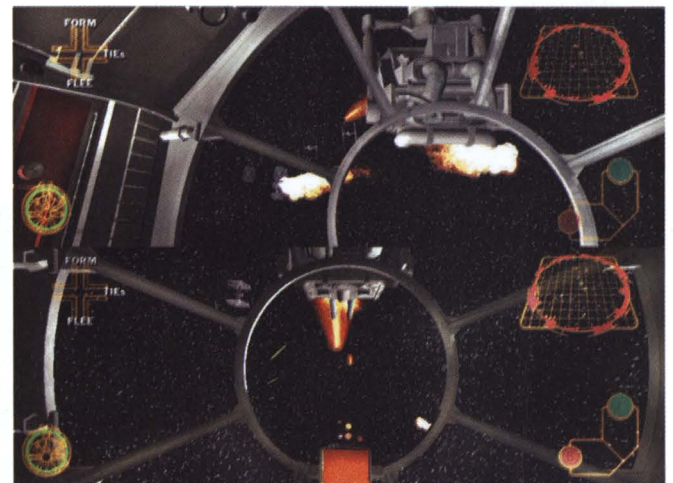
These aspects will be absolutely crucial in drawing attention from peripheral 'Star Wars' fans – the millions who watched and enjoyed the original movie trilogy but are not committed to the series to the point that they know Yoda's age or the exact top speed of the Millennium Falcon.

However, it's the all-new multiplayer mode that looks like representing *Rebel Strike*'s major evolution. Criticised for leaving multiplayer out of *Rogue Leader*, Factor 5 has taken the extraordinary step of including the whole of that second game within *Rebel Strike* – playable in twoplayer cooperative mode.

Thanks to a new 3D engine which Factor 5 claims can handle twice as many ships or characters as its precursor, the splitscreen mode looks like being integral to the game's longevity. A deathmatch mode capable of supporting up to four players is also currently being mooted. Whether *Rebel Strike* will be the game that re-establishes LucasArts as the master of the space combat genre remains to be seen, of course.

Still, Factor 5 appears to have learned many lessons from its previous games, and *Rebel Strike*'s feature list is far bigger and more varied than many had expected.

Plus, at the very least, this is easily the best-looking 'Star Wars' game yet. And to a large proportion of the films' notoriously loyal fanbase, that will almost certainly be enough.



Old faces from the original 'Star Wars' trilogy put in notable appearances – replete with period-authentic haircuts (above right). Multiplayer action (above left) should form a large part of the game's appeal. Those disappointed by the limitations of previous *Rogue Leader* titles will no doubt relish piloting a speederbike through a forest (above centre)

Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles

SquareSoft prepares what looks to be a triumphant return

Publisher: SquareSoft ■ Developer: In-house ■ Release: TBC

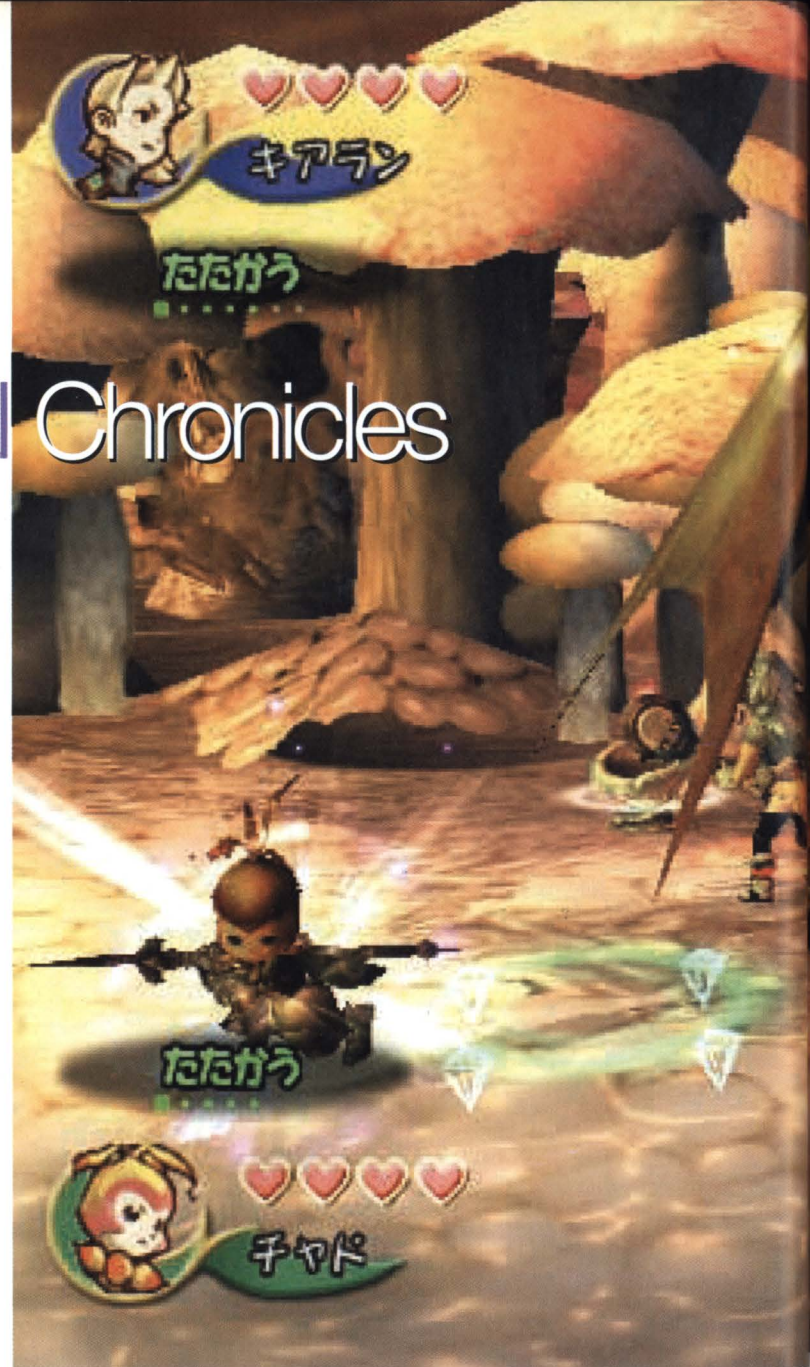


It's difficult to overstate the importance of a *Final Fantasy* title on Nintendo home hardware.

Fans have waited for another one since the dawn of the PlayStation – and they'll no doubt be relieved to discover that the game they're getting looks great.

Crystal Chronicles rejects the notion of *Final Fantasy* games as singular pursuits based around monumental personal journeys. Focused on the camaraderie of four players in contained environments, *Chronicles* is controlled either by using a standard Gamecube controller or via a GBA linked to the Gamecube.

It's certainly an advantage to opt for the GBA control method as it allows you to view maps and character info that aren't visible with the standard joypad. You'll also be able to shuffle six special abilities using



the GBA screen, allowing you to make character refinements without, crucially, disrupting the experience for you colleagues. What's more, you'll receive certain information and clues that aren't available to other players, ensuring that communication is a crucial aspect of this title. Player one, for instance, could receive more detailed maps, making it best for them to take the lead.

Chronicles cleverly encourages gamers to stick together by giving one character a crystal which emits a forcefield and helps to protect the other players. If you're in possession of the crystal, however, you are unable to attack, a fact that adds a subtle tactical twist to proceedings.

It's not all love and harmony in the *Chronicles* world. Expect to use your characters' healing abilities frequently to

revive downed colleagues after brutal battles with multiple enemies.

It's worth noting that the game is played in realtime, a significant departure from the turn-based action of older *Final Fantasy* titles. During battles you have to aim blows, charge attacks up to increase the damage you inflict, and move around.

Another departure from the usual format is in the structure of the adventure. Instead of the usual sprawling epic, this *Final Fantasy* title is mission based, with levels set around all the staple RPG locales, from woods to villages.

All in all, *Chronicles* is shaping up as a finely balanced mix of familiar dynamics and a bundle of innovative features. And die-hard SquareSoft and Nintendo fans of old will no doubt revel in the fact that it's a GameCube exclusive.

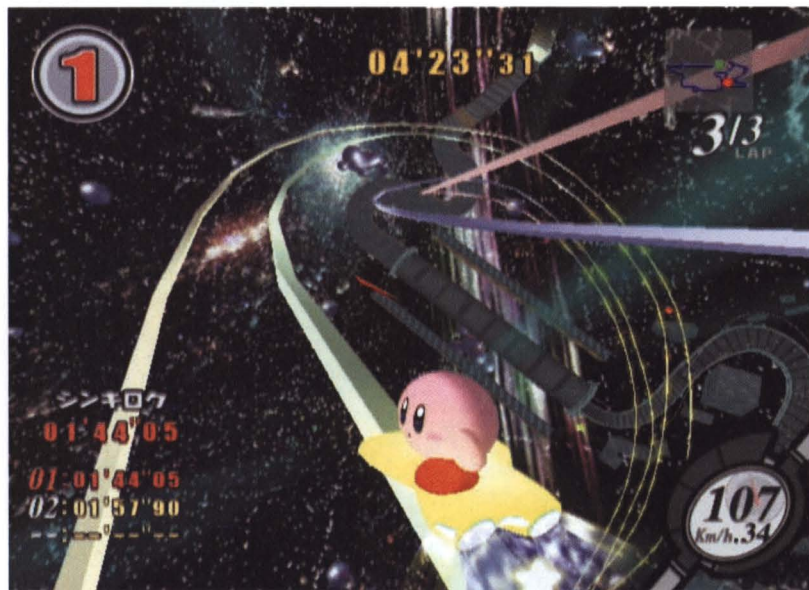


Nintendo fans will no doubt delight in Square's return to the brand, although they might be a little disappointed at the unoriginality of certain enemies (main). The heroes themselves, however, are depicted with much flair. Using them cooperatively is vital to the experience

Kirby Air Ride

Having been cancelled on N64, the pink blob returns

Publisher: Nintendo Developer: Nintendo/HAL Release: TBC



The fourplayer mode could make this as fun as the equivalent in *Snowboard Kids*. Weapons will make a difference, though

Floating around on hovering vehicles, Kirby and his series' other characters star in this ultra-speedy alternative to *Mario Kart*. It's so fast, in fact, that the only control you have over the pace of your ride is a brake.

In keeping with the marshmallow-like Kirby's insatiable appetite, the game also allows you to not only attack your rivals and activate a range of speed-ups, but also consume opponents.

The range of weapons at your disposal is already looking extensive and includes swords, bombs and all manner of projectiles, all of which can be swiped and

used by any of the characters. There's no doubt *KAR* is designed with accessibility as a key feature.

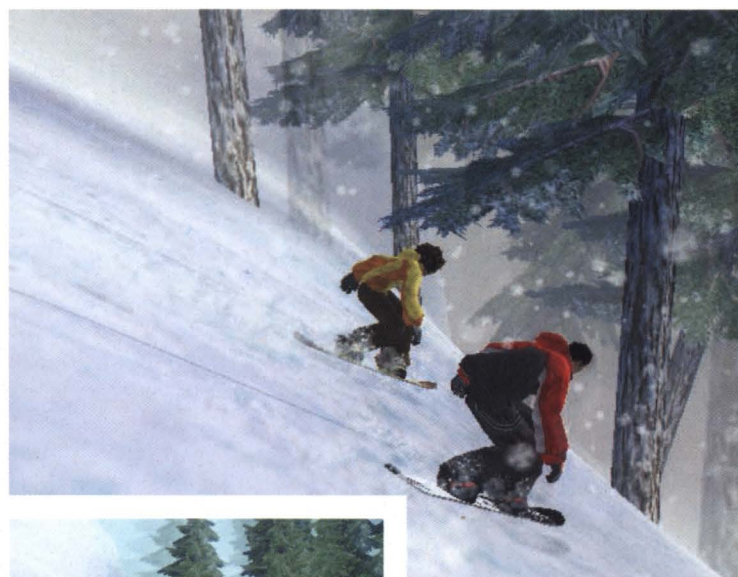
The action is straightforward and takes place over three game modes. *Air Ride* is a standard thirdperson-view racing option, *Top Ride* is a topdown take on the same principle, and *City Trail* is a race against the clock to collect vehicles and power-ups in preparation for a head-to-head battle mode.

Naturally, the game features an essential fourplayer splitscreen mode, although plans for online play and further connectivity are yet to be confirmed. Don't hold your breath.

1080° Avalanche

Has Nintendo got what it takes to take on new champ, *Amped*?

Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: In-house (NST) ■ Release: September (US), TBC (UK)



The gameplay system allows you to pull off the usual range of tricks and grinds – even when faced with the threat of an oncoming mountain train (right)



The E3 build used motion blur to impart a sensation of speed. Framerate issues remain considerable concerns, however

1 080° Snowboarding debuted in 1998 and sparked something of a revival for powder-based boarding games, knocking SCE's *Cool Boarders* series into a cocked beanie. Since then titles such as *Amped 1* and *2* and more famously the *SSX* games have refined the hi-adrenaline, trick-based dynamic so elegantly realised in the N64 classic. So, the genre has moved on in the five years it has taken developer NST to fashion a *1080°* sequel.

More like *Amped* than *SSX Tricky* due to its cleaner, simulation style, *1080° Avalanche* judders along admirably, showing off neat textured snow effects

and proving refreshingly free of those grating, stuck-behind-a-tree-moving-uphill moments. The usual repertoire of grabs, flips, grinds and spins is at your disposal, with no evidence yet of any attempts to shake up the gameplay staples of the genre. The *Avalanche* moniker is a nod to the interactive environmental effects, none of which were showcased by the few downhill race courses exhibited at this year's E3. In the finished game, set for a September release in the US, rocks will fall, caves will collapse, bridges will tumble and the eponymous torrents of falling snow will threaten to bury your boarder.

Avalanche's frame rate is passable, but hardly impressive. It remains to be seen whether the game can withstand the promised slope traffic, whooping fans and aforementioned environmental effects without losing the sense of speed so effectively realised with motion blurring in this code. One of the game's greatest draws for veterans of the lazily ported *SSX Tricky* is that it's designed specifically for the GC and its controller, so there are no finger-cracking stretches for those extra-special moves. That said, *Avalanche* is hardly shaping up to be revolutionary, more a solid, graphically tweaked update of a proven concept.





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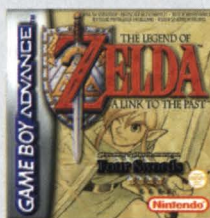


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Which one takes your fancy?



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The Strongest Link?

Elsewhere in this issue both David Gosen and Shigeru Miyamoto sing the virtues of a hitherto-underexploited area of GameCube's technology: connectivity. **Equip** examines its potential

See the logo stamped over the Game Boy Advance up there? You'd better get used to it, because if all goes to plan it will begin appearing on all manner of high-profile GameCube titles over the coming months.

The 'Game Play Enhanced' legend will appear alongside Nintendo's infamous 'Seal Of Quality' on the packaging of any title offering bonus options when it is played on a GameCube console umbilically connected

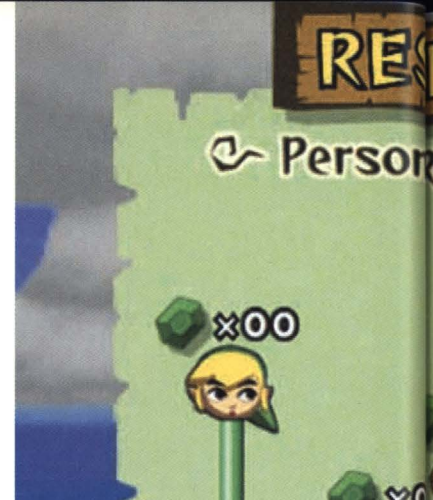
to a GBA handheld. The nature of such enhancement will vary in accordance with the game in question, but those who've played *The Wind Waker* will already have an idea of the initiative's genuine potential.

In the absence of an online strategy Nintendo has been pushing GC-GBA connectivity very hard to developers across the globe, and it has found a more than willing partner in EA, whose forthcoming sports titles will offer compatibility.

Despite Nintendo's big plans and hopes, however, it's difficult to see how things will pan out in practical terms. There's a danger that, like similarly ingenious pushes in the past, GC-GBA connectivity may only be used by true hobbyist gamers – it may, in fact, be a little too clever for the massmarket consumer.

But hopefully it'll all hinge on the quality of the gaming experience. Here, **Equip** takes a look at the lead titles.





Each Link has his own colour, for obvious reasons. Tetra summarises the participants' performances (main). Do you recognise this pirate (right) from anywhere? Action from *Zelda: Four Swords* (left group of shots)

As each player controls Link on the TV screen you'd be forgiven for thinking it was running a SNES game – until the *Wind Waker*-esque smoke swirls and other cartoony effects being to appear

The Legend Of Zelda: Four Swords

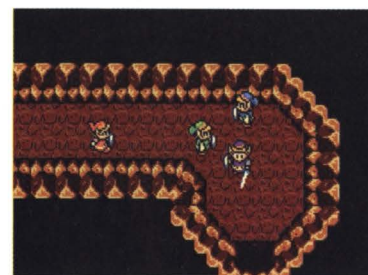
Those who purchased *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* on GBA will have already tasted this as a mini-game on that cart, but Nintendo is so confident in its potential (indeed, Shigeru Miyamoto claims that it's his favourite game to play at the moment – see interview, p80) that it is also producing it as a standalone GameCube release. Players simply boot up the game on the console and data is squirted down to up to four participating GBAs, with no need for carts.

Like *Tetra's Trackers*, *Four Swords* uses simplistic but distinctive presentation. In fact,

as each player controls his or her Link on the TV screen via GBA's controls, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was running a SNES game – until the *Wind Waker*-esque smoke swirls and other cartoony effects appear.

GBAs come into play when participants break away from each other – you could leave the other three players outside while you enter a house, for example, whereby action specific only to you transfers over to the small screen.

Existing GBA *Four Swords* players will be aware of the potential of this GC version, and there's a bundle of new content to discover.



Underground sections see the action move over to GBA screens, which obviously lowers the detail



The Legend Of Zelda: Tetra's Trackers

Nintendo's desire to squeeze the most out of its intellectual properties becomes especially evident in this, a game featuring Tetra, one of the pirates from *The Wind Waker*, alongside her fellow high-sea adventurers.

As the title suggests, it's all about tracking. As Link, you embark on missions to seek out a number of pirates, each one giving you a stamp to prove that you're fulfilled that part of the quest. Importantly, each has to be found in order, which adds another layer of

strategy. Finding your way around is made possible by using maps and also picking up hints from Tetra via the Pirate's Charm (which also appeared in *GC Zelda*, of course).

Using the requisite number of linked-up GBAs, up to four Links can play at the same time (each wearing his own colour of tunic), and it all boils down to a simple test of who can recover the most stamps with a time limit.

It's a twee little strategy-actioner, then, as opposed to anything like rocket science.



Despite looking like a SNES game, GameCube *Four Swords* frequently fills the screen with vast swathes of collectable jewels, along with legions of enemy knights. Not that you'd know it from these screenshots...

Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles

You can imagine Nintendo's request to SquareSoft when the RPG specialist decided to finally return to the brand with which it originally made its name:

"Yes, great, an RPG – but have you considering thinking about it a little differently? We have this new push towards connectivity we think might be appropriate..."

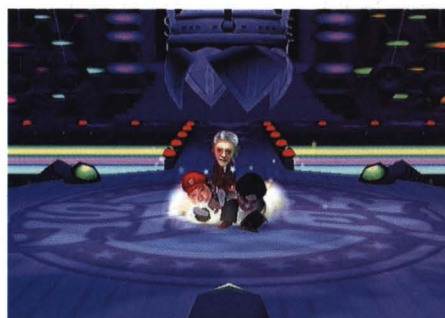
And so the first *Final Fantasy* on a Nintendo home console for many years is hoped to be a killer advertisement for the unique gameplay opportunities afforded by one simple and inexpensive cable.

Four GBAs allow multiple adventurers to work alongside each other using the units'

digital D-pads for control. And cooperation will be key, with players combining efforts and powers to overcome puzzles and defeat the game's roster of enemy characters.

Each GBA screen is used to view stats and other character information (thereby removing the hassle of main-screen action being obscured), along with clues that will only be made available to certain players (such information is intended to be verbally communicated within the party to enhance the experience).

All told, *Crystal Chronicles* could be the game that propels Nintendo's connectivity strategy into the limelight.



Stage Debut's heritage goes back to Nintendo's 64DD hardware add-on for its previous generation of home hardware, but the company has been refining the concept ever since. Yes, that really is ex-Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi at the back of the class



The environments may be rich in polygon detail, but everything's controlled by good old-fashioned D-pad, something sure to please bearded RPG enthusiasts of yesteryear

Each GBA screen is used to view stats and other character information (thereby removing the hassle of main-screen action being obscured) along with clues available to certain players

Stage Debut

One of the most original titles demonstrated by Nintendo at this year's E3 was this, a piece of software that defies description and therefore transcends genre classification.

The Game Boy Advance element comes into play with a new cartridge fitted with a camera similar to those featured in mobile phones. This is used to snap images of yourself and friends; the facial details are then transferred over to the GameCube, where they are mapped on to the features of an avatar. Then the software asks you a selection of yes/no questions which shape the form and functionality of the digital lifeform.

Stage Debut cannot really be termed a game, because the characters within its unusual world (or at least the ones *Equip* has witnessed during demos) do not play typical games. Rather, they appear as specimens in a sort of zoo-like environment.

Clearly the title is currently aimed at the Japanese market, which may account for some

confusion during Shigeru Miyamoto's E3 presentation, but the technology, at least, has the potential to have a big impact in the personalisation of gaming experiences.

In simple terms it could be used to identify players' faces during racing games (as Namco has done in the arcade), but *Sims*-style environments seem to be more appropriate.

Whatever the case, it is an appealing little diversion from Nintendo's ever-busy labs.



Stage Debut offers a selection of environments in which your digital personalities can play around. Along with your own creations, the gameworld is inhabited by characters from *Animal Crossing*, *Pikmin*, and other games

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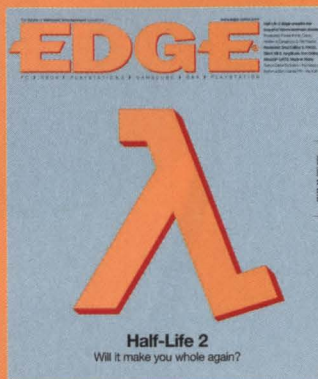
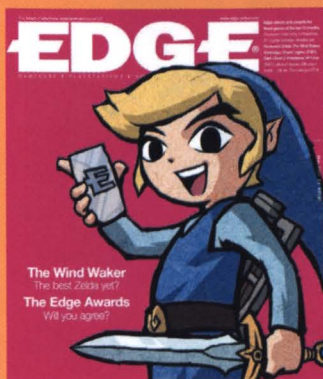
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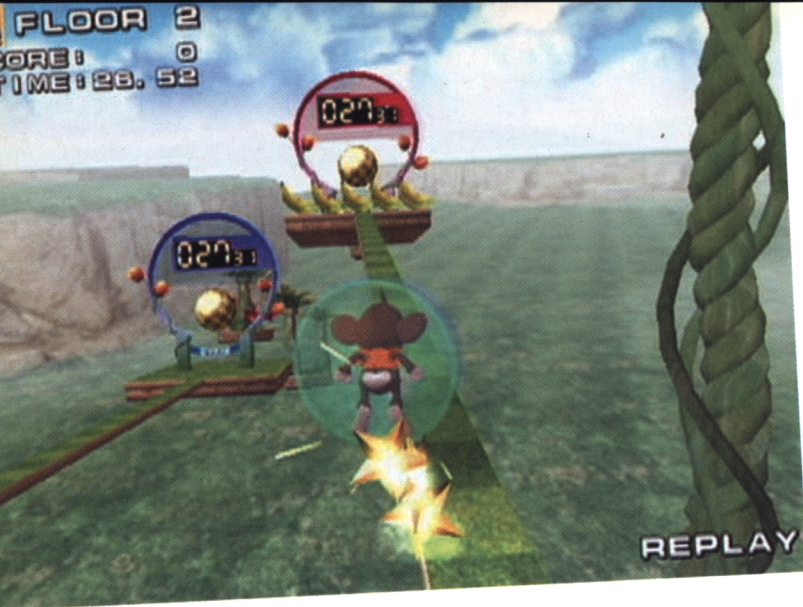
Monkey Business

It's simple, elegant, devilish and brilliant – and somehow a defining title for GameCube. **Equip** looks at one of the most challenging and rewarding videogames ever made



It's called *Super Monkey Ball* and you control it with a banana." Possessed of one of the simplest game mechanics ever conceived, assured a place in history among those precious few Videogames That Never Age, *Super Monkey Ball* will be remembered for a very long time to come. A flawless blend of casual simplicity, hardcore difficulty and freeform possibility, there's a neverending quest for perfect control available to those who ask for it.

As the finest GameCube launch title and, more significantly, Sega's debut appearance on a Nintendo home console, *Super Monkey Ball*'s historical importance is beyond doubt. Considering it was made in only six months and had the future of Sega and Nintendo's relationship riding on its success, it's something of a miracle that it proved such an original, quirky and yet finely tuned experience, and one that **Equip** is not the only one to enjoy.



There are videos on the Internet, videos that at first seem to be part of some kind of elaborate hoax, but which really form a practical demonstration of the singular depth of possibility *Super Monkey Ball* offers. No camera trickery is involved in the shocking displays of skill these players perform. It is simply the ultimate expression of the freedom inherent to the game. Amusement Vision must be shocked and flattered that so many players have taken it upon themselves to master its title. The fact it's been entrusted with Nintendo's prized IP, *F-Zero*, must mean Sega's GameCube debut did a lot of things very right indeed.

No camera trickery is involved in the shocking displays of skill these players perform. It is simply the ultimate expression of the freedom inherent in the game. Its developer must be flattered

Jumps are achieved by bouncing off the facing edges of level geometry, allowing players to reach tricky areas (left). True *Monkey Ball* masters even pull off consecutive jumps at speed to gain additional height (below right)



Pack Attacks

The growth of video-capture technology, broadband Internet access and MAME has finally given videogame connoisseurs the world over access to the world's greatest arcade and the world's greatest players. *Ikaruga* cleared in one life. *Virtua Fighter* world championships. *Tetris* played faster than the eye can see. All these are available for immediate download and appreciation with no smoke, no bus ride into town, and no threat of big boys stealing your change.

A small group of players based at Klow.net (the *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark* world records site) have proved just how staggeringly robust *Super Monkey Ball* is by

taking the game to quite unfathomable heights. Their pursuit of ever-higher scores in the game's Practice mode has led to the formulation of some astonishingly audacious tactics and techniques for squeezing in one extra banana or one fewer frame on the way to the goal line. Walls in the way? Hop over them. Can't get round the bumpers? Bounce off them. Multiple paths through the levels? Why not travel them all and pick up every banana and every point of every second on the way to a hi-score. No, sorry, to the hi-score.

PackAttack is the world's number one *Super Monkey Ball* player. At only 19 years of age, he has managed to make Nagoshi's opus his own. Along with second- and third-ranked players, SDKess and JOakley, this group has imagined and then perfected every trick and technique shown in the world record videos. To imagine the dedication of these players, consider that



Skipping between tiles isn't as difficult as it initially appears, and it's an essential activity if you're looking to shave seconds off your level-completion times. On this level, you can begin hopping right from the outset

Wireframe addicts

Having watched experts at play, it becomes irresistible to try some of the feats yourself. Hearing a few words of advice and encouragement from PackAttack himself can help keep your spirits high when you've missed the goal line by mere millimetres for the hundredth time: "It takes practice, but it also takes luck. I managed the A11 WR in about an hour, but I was lucky to pick up all the bananas and still finish. All the strategies we use took time to develop, but all of them are possible. We've proved that much."



PackAttack has scored over ten million points on the Expert run, a score that can only be achieved by looping the game's two hardest sections, long-winding but formidably thin wires, for a total of 24 hours. To imagine their talent, consider that SDKess progressed from tearing off the game's wrapping to completing the fiendish high-impossible Master mode in a mere 20 hours.

These players don't stick to the floors. The way they ride walls and skip from moving platform to moving platform will have you swearing they had a jump button, but no. No tricks, no lies, and no cheating. Just pure analogue skill, one stick, one thumb and one goal. In *Super Monkey Ball*, there's only ever one possible action, so mastery of the game becomes mastery of the infinitely minute possibilities of Nintendo's analogue stick.

There's a larger community at work here. Achieving the astonishingly difficult task of completing the game's Master mode is a badge of undeniable hardcore ability and commitment that gamers up and down the Internet wear with pride. The mention of the game's most infamous level, the tortuous Expert Level Seven, will bring tales of dark frustration and pure, absolute exultation from weathered players. This from a game that is equally famous for its ability to charm and enthrall even the most casual of gamers, mums, dads and girlfriends, is grand praise





indeed. It all adds up to a game that will hold interest for the medium for some considerable time.

Synergy

The GameCube's analogue controller seems almost to have been designed with *Super Monkey Ball* in mind, its octagonal ridge enabling almost digital control and making the thinnest of wires a real, if distant possibility. If you want to complete some of the later levels fast enough to score a time bonus, then there's no choice but to push that stick all the way home. Imagine attempting some of the levels without the safety of these grooves – it would be a sweaty-palmed nightmare. *Super Monkey Ball* has used the strengths of the unique GameCube analogue stick to greater effect than any title released since.

This accurate and considered control method is vital to the game's success, but it does not act alone. Another vital contribution is the solid structure of the physics system, which enables players to express themselves so creatively. Dedicated monkey rollers can use every piece of every level to trick, flip and flick their simian buddy to the goal and be constantly rewarded with a consistent response to their inputs. Combine this with

the simple, single objective of each level and it's inevitable that some players would discover ways to play that the designers never imagined.

Again, the synergy of input to animation is an example of the genius at work at Amusement Vision. From Miyamoto's *Super Mario 64* to Funamizu's *Street Fighter II*, the greatest designers have always understood that a truly satisfying game experience gives the player genuinely rewarding feedback between controller and character animation. A sphere has no moving parts, so the feeling of feedback between player and ball here is as perfect as you could imagine. The



A truly satisfying game experience gives the player genuinely rewarding feedback. A sphere has no moving parts, so the feeling of feedback is as perfect as you could imagine

addition of the sweetest of sweet little monkeys, ever reliant on your steady hand to stop them from plummeting to a terminal flattening, introduces that all-important emotional connection, too. **Equip** looks at the little monkey and thinks, "Aww, bless the little monkey." You try that little bit harder to keep the ball on the checkerboard because you can't face that simian blood on your hands. It would be so much less distressing to lose a mere ball than it would Aiai's heart-shaped behind or Baby's curl.

Equip will maintain its quest for the Master levels and continue to take inspiration from the exploits of PackAttack and friends, much as Amusement Vision will continue to prove the place for Sega's name on Nintendo hardware. Even if future monkey-hurling titles, such as the rumoured *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Crazy*, fail to match the genius of the original game, it will still remain as an example of a simple idea formed pure, perfect and complete. Here's to many more of those.



Continued >



Completing expert level nine's 0.1 route imparts a rare sense of satisfaction. Performing the equivalent on advanced level 11 is currently beyond Equip staffers' reach, however, but it's an addictive kind of challenge

Links

If you need inspiration to discover the depths of SMB, go here:

www.ajshakesby.co.uk/smbvids
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www.klow.net

Interview: Toshihiro Nagoshi

Sega's monkey maestro talks simians in spheres with Equip



Did you design *Super Monkey Ball* with the techniques shown in the world record videos in mind?

Yes, it's all as planned. Well, that's what I would like to say! But, to be honest, I'm really surprised! This is far more than we thought was possible in terms of gameplay and clear time. But I always hoped this kind of thing could happen.

Have you been surprised at the lengths to which people have gone to in their attempts to master the game?

I'm not surprised about the way people are playing, but I do feel relief, because I see that our ideas and our gameplay is widely accepted to the point where people are competing in such a crazy way.

***Super Monkey Ball 2* had quite different level design to the first game. Were the levels in the sequel designed to give people the kind of creative flexibility they had shown with *Super Monkey Ball*?**

Yes, indeed. *Super Monkey Ball 2*'s image was clear from the beginning, from the time we were working on the first game. If I put all the ideas into the first game, I thought people would have difficulty getting involved, as it would've been too difficult. I had to think my moves carefully, step by step.

***Super Monkey Ball* seems to be aimed at the casual player, with its simple controls and cute characters. Were you surprised that it became so popular with more committed players?**

I hoped all gamers would like the game. I made it deep enough to satisfy the most hardcore gamers of all.

The GameCube controller seems to be perfect for the level of control required in the game. Did you have the GameCube controller in mind when you designed the arcade original?

No, I had no such idea in mind, but I believe it is more enjoyable using a home console controller than the arcade joystick. So our decision to convert the game for the GameCube user was right.

What effect did controller design have on your decision not to port *Super Monkey Ball* to other formats?

None at all. This wasn't why I didn't release

the game on other platforms. I would say it was decided because the GameCube is so cute looking. Hardcore gamers are enjoying the game in so many ways, so that makes the move to other platforms possible. I'm still thinking about it.

***Super Monkey Ball* was made very quickly in order to meet the GameCube launch. Was the design compromised because you had to finish it so swiftly?**

Yes, it was a short development and, yes, this was quite a challenge, but we didn't give up anything on the content. It was the very first game Sega released on GC, so we were very anxious to make it right, even in such a short period of time. I think we managed to make a good title, but as it received such a good welcome from users, we were even more anxious to make the sequel even greater.

Sega and Nintendo's partnership in the Tri-Force arcade hardware project was a surprise to many people. Did the experiences of making *Super Monkey Ball* have any effect on your decision to join Nintendo in the *F-Zero* update?

Yes, in many respects it did. It revealed our creativity, skill and work capacity to Nintendo, to everybody in the industry.

How will the experience of making *Super Monkey Ball* affect your future dealings with Nintendo?

Well, I don't know the full answer to that yet, but one thing is crystal clear: we are with Nintendo for a while.

After *F-Zero*, what are your future plans to work with Nintendo platforms and the Tri-Force hardware?

That's a good question. But come on now, you really don't think I'm going to tell you, do you? It's a secret!

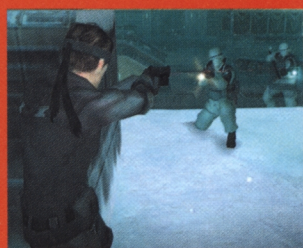


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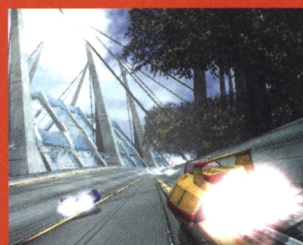
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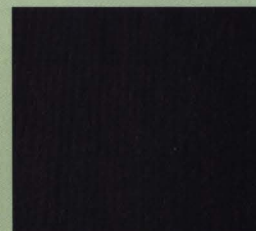
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INDEPENDENT NINTENDO GAMING



Interview:

Shigeru Miyamoto

Online play; GameCube-to-GBA connectivity; *Metal Gear Solid*; EyeToy, *Halo 2*; the absence of Hiroshi Yamauchi; Sony's PSP handheld; the next instalment of *Zelda*; what he'd ask Sony's Ken Kutaragi – these are the things you talk about with the world's highest-profile videogame creative...



The videogame-development world is notoriously short on personalities, but that only makes its stars shine even brighter. And none more so than **Shigeru Miyamoto**, with whom **Equip** spoke following Nintendo's mixed showing at E3.

As the videogame landscape continues to evolve, the legendary designer/producer/icon continues to face new challenges as his company attempts to scabble back market share from two increasingly fierce competitors.

Equip tackled him on a selection of issues affecting Nintendo today.

First: *Mario Sunshine*. Some people suggest that it's more frustrating than it is fun, even speculating that you didn't have as much involvement in the game as you did with *Super Mario 64*. Is there any truth in that?

It's a difficult question because if I say I wasn't as involved as I was with the N64 version it sounds like an excuse. I was definitely overseeing the game. Obviously as someone who's overseeing the game, it's my job to go in there and make sure the gameplay is solid and that it's easy enough to play without frustration. Compared to other platform games out

there, *Mario* is definitely more interesting.

The learning curve in *Sunshine*, which isn't especially smooth, is something that's been repeatedly criticised.

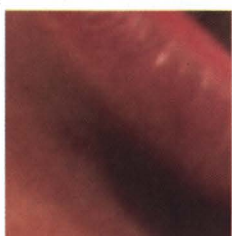
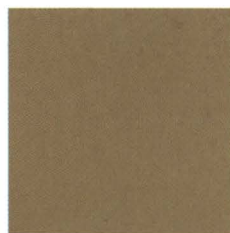
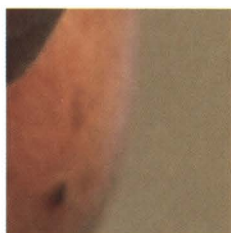
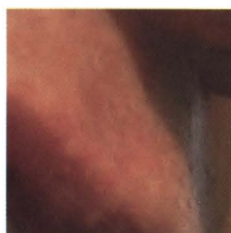
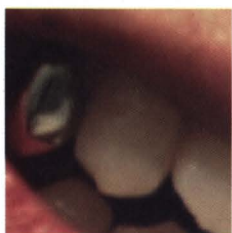
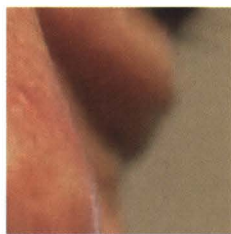
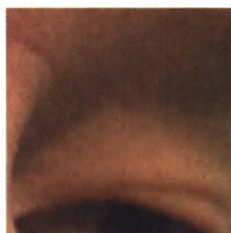
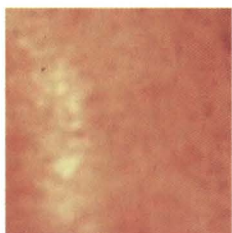
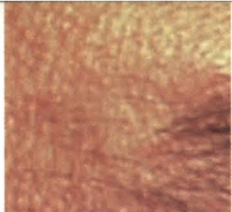
I think that's definitely the case with *Mario Sunshine*, but we are always trying to challenge at Nintendo and with *Mario Sunshine* we learned some things... When we make the next Mario game it will be a lot better.

***Pikmin* stood out as the most original game from Nintendo in the last few years, but at this year's E3 you**

resurrected a number of old franchises. How do you work out when the time is right to introduce new ideas?

For us this year's E3 was all about connectivity and with connectivity we don't necessarily think that we have to produce brand-new games. Even just taking older-style games and adding new gameplay structure to them I think makes the games very interesting and fun.

But actually if you look at the connectivity games on the show floor one of them is truly original even though it's based on the latest *Legend of Zelda*. It's called *Tetra's Trackers*. It's a style of



gameplay we've never seen before.

What Nintendo's doing with connectivity is definitely interesting, and it seems to be your focus while your competitors push online gaming. Are you interested in online activity?

We are definitely interested in online play. The problem right now, as a business model, online isn't sustainable. So it's very difficult for us to move in that direction. That doesn't mean we never will. We are always researching technology and we've experimented with online in the past, especially in Japan, and we will continue to do that. But we are looking at ways we can take that online feature, that linked network play, and tie that to gameplay that's really unique. And on the show floor today you will see that we have *Mario Kart* which is linked via a local area network.

What do you think of Xbox and PlayStation2 at the moment? Do you think Microsoft and Sony have software to compete with Nintendo's?

Actually, I haven't seen their latest offerings so I can't really answer that question. Have they got anything good? [Laughs]

***Halo 2* looks good. Even though firstperson shooters aren't especially popular in Japan, it may be worth taking a look at it.**

Nintendo. So in that sense we have a very broad knowledge of games and business that enables us to work effectively.

If you were to ask Ken Kutaragi one question, what would it be?

[Long pause followed by fits of laughter] I would ask him if he thinks the future of the entertainment business is bright.

Is Sony's forthcoming PSP handheld something that worries you and Nintendo? Sony will obviously put a lot of money and marketing behind it in order to suggest that it's a leap ahead of Game Boy Advance SP.

I think it's important for Nintendo not to react based on what other companies are doing and then act on what we think Nintendo should be doing. So in that sense we don't pay a lot of attention to what the other companies are doing. On the other hand, though, I realise [Sony] is a company that is very good at marketing and PR when a new system comes out and because of that it puts a lot of pressure on us to support the Game Boy Advance and make sure we release a hand held that people are going to want to purchase.

Sony's EyeToy was popular at E3. Do you wish Nintendo had come up something as novel as this hardware?

"We are definitely interested in online play. The problem right now, as a business model, online isn't sustainable. So it's very difficult for us to move in that direction"

No, I haven't played *Halo*. When the original first came out I took a quick look at the game to see what it was like.

How different is it at Nintendo now that Hiroshi Yamauchi has stepped down?

The transition has been very smooth. Of course, Mr Yamauchi is still available to us in a consultant role so any time we have any considerable challenges we can discuss them with him. He is available to us and we are able to solve issues that way. We've also got six different people each with their different specialities and knowledge. They essentially head up a committee that makes a lot of decisions at

I haven't seen it yet myself, but I've read a little about it online. We definitely have the technology to do things like that. We've done Game Boy cameras in the past. It's definitely something we'd look at and we're still looking at. But I don't know if they're talking about it for PR purposes or if it's a product that is actually playable. Can you actually play it?

Yes, the technology's all finished. Gamers will be able to buy it soon. Is it fun?

Yes, it's a lot of fun. It's very simple and suitable for the whole family. It's almost

like something that Nintendo would have traditionally done, in fact.

I guess I'll have to take a look at it to see what it is like. I will see what we can do. We have *Stage Debut*, and that is a lot of crazy fun. [Laughs]

Is your personal output the same now as it was ten or 15 years ago, or do you have to let other talent flourish? Are there other Miyamotos at Nintendo coming through the ranks?

I don't really know how to judge my own level of creativity but I'm still having fun, so I guess that's important. It is true that there are a lot of younger developers and directors at Nintendo that are rising through the ranks.

"GameCube's processing power and capabilities are really much higher than those of PS2... I think the team creating *Metal Gear Solid 3* would find it much easier on GameCube than PS2"

The question has been asked before, but what about adult content for GameCube? *Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes*, for instance, seems to be a deliberate attempt to appeal to a more mature audience.

We are trying to give the GameCube a broad base appeal across all major ages. So *Metal Gear*, for example, is helping us do that. Essentially we want to have a lineup that anyone of any age will be able to look at and find something that they like. *Eternal Darkness* and *Metroid Prime* are examples of games we have done that with. And I think that games like *Metal Gear*, which we are working on in cooperation with other third parties, are strengthening that line up.

The GameCube is really the easiest system to develop for. Its processing power and the capabilities of GameCube are really much higher than those of the PS2. I think that a lot of teams that have developed games on PS2 and other systems are finding that they can develop on GameCube for lower costs and get a lot of capacity out of GameCube. We don't talk about it much but I'm sure that the team that is developing *Metal Gear* on the GameCube now... and seeing what they are doing with the *Metal Gear Solid 3* game, are finding that if they had

developed it on the GameCube it would have been much easier for them. I think they are probably having a hard time developing it for the PS2.

How do you personally compare GameCube with Xbox?

Well, the Xbox does have some pretty high technological capabilities, but they also have a much higher price point than the GameCube does. [Laughs] In terms of overall performance, I think the GameCube is better.

Do you still get excited by games after all these years?

Yeah, I always say it might be interesting to do something other than making

games but I always find myself sitting here still making games and having fun doing it.

Do you think you'll ever go back to the more realistic version of Link first previewed at Space World 2000 for a new *Zelda* game, or are you going to stick with the cel-shaded version?

There are a lot of things we are considering doing with the franchise. Obviously in *Soul Calibur II* there is a realistic Link in that game. But if we tried to make a realistic-looking *Zelda* game the cost involved in that would be tremendous. We might spend five years on something like that.

Everyone's saying that, now you've established the technology for a cel-shaded Link, a sequel is just around the corner. What's the truth in that?

We are always considering how we can use those resources to develop games effectively, like we did with *Majora's Mask* from *Ocarina Of Time*.

Finally, which games are you playing at the moment?

Four Swords is a lot of fun. We play it at the office. Once it's finished I'll take it home and play it with my family.

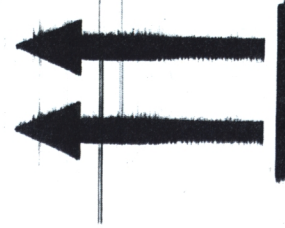




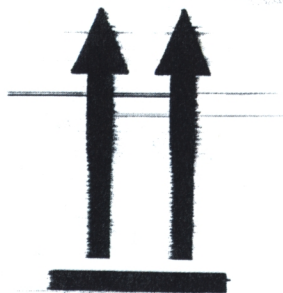
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Thinking
Inside
The Box

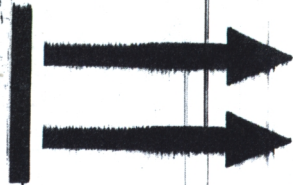


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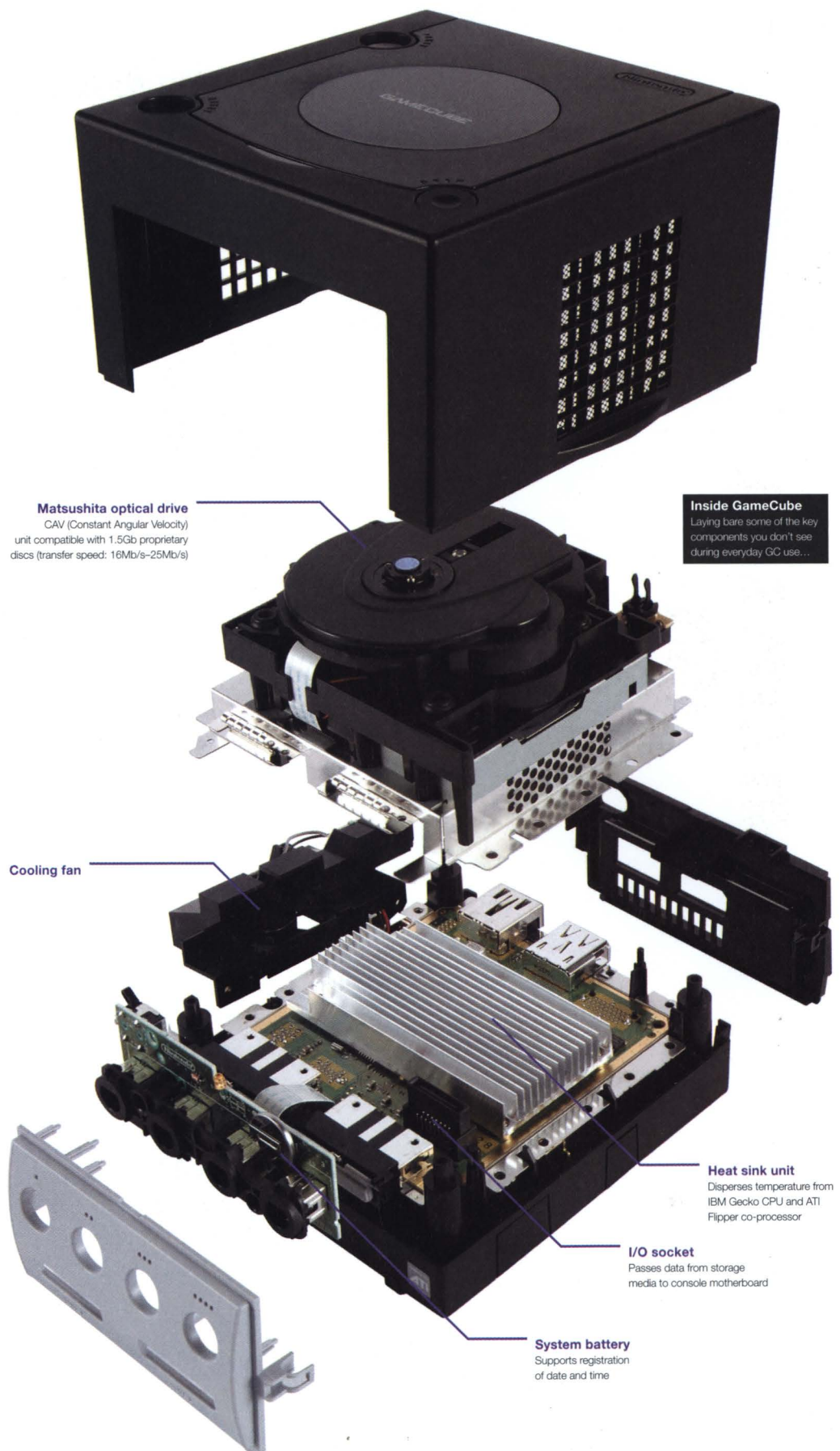


It may look like a toy, but GameCube is a highly optimised piece of consumer electronics, balancing cost, performance and accessibility in perfect harmony. **Equip** explains how it's been streamlined to perfection

I imagine, if you can, a beauty parade of game consoles. In such circumstances, it's easy to conjure up a picture of PlayStation2 as, say, a lanky Teutonic blonde, whereas a muscle-bound Playmate would best fit the Xbox stereotype. Fiercely competitive, these two would nevertheless share the same slightly hissy attitude. Both, for example, would express their desire, should they win the competition, to save mankind in a noble if self-serving way. Similarly, second place wouldn't be good enough for either.

GameCube, however, would be a very different sort of contender. A cute, if dumpy girl-next-door, she'd giggle at the others' serious ways. Would she win the parade? Probably not, but despite the over-protective nature of her chaperone, she might not really care, and she would certainly be the most popular choice among any neutrals.

Which, of course, is pretty much how it is back in the real world. While Sony and Microsoft face off in a winner-takes-all bout for the living-room entertainment gateway thingiwhatsit, Nintendo's focus is on games and games alone. Early interest in redesigned machines from Matsushita (Panasonic) with standard size DVD-playback has all but disappeared, while the company shows little interest in getting its core players online. Instead quality software, albeit quality software from Nintendo, keeps the faithful happy. *Super Mario Sunshine*, *Zelda: The Wind Waker*, *Super Metroid*, *Eternal Darkness* – each a solid title, and at least as good as anything the opposition can muster. And that's partly because, despite the brickbats constantly thrown in its direction, GameCube is technically as innovative as





its competitors. It's just that its charms aren't necessarily as obvious.

Heart of the matter

With its hard-won experience from creating hardware stretching back to the early '80s, the first fact to be emphasised is that Nintendo's design teams are no fools when it comes to videogame machines. Unfairly perceived by the public as the weakest of the three consoles, GameCube's processing power is in fact broadly comparable; developers rate it somewhere between PlayStation2 and Xbox. Sadly, much of the confusion about its capabilities arose from Nintendo's reluctance to get involved in the specification war that developed between Sony and Microsoft.

Sony's infamous claim of 66 million polygons per second for PlayStation2's throughput was met by Microsoft's absurd counter of 150 million polys per second. In contrast, Nintendo's measured announcement of GameCube's upper limit of around 15 million textured and lit polygons per second, combined with the console's kid-friendly shape and colour, quickly seemed to get it labelled as a toy, in every sense.

Of course, the true performance of both Sony's and Microsoft's consoles when running game code rather than optimised technical demos is much closer to the figures

Nintendo quoted for GameCube – for example, pulling out the stops on Xbox might get you 20 million polygons per second, at best. A far cry from the 150 million originally cited by Microsoft. This is all the more impressive considering

Nintendo's stated aim to manufacture the GameCube as cheaply as possible. And this, combined with its other goal – to ensure GameCube was as simple to program as possible – were the key driving forces behind the console's architecture.

The main reason behind this philosophy was Nintendo's experience with its previous console, the N64. Released too late after PlayStation to be a true rival, sales suffered because Sony was able to aggressively cut the price of its console through economies of scale. Despite the N64 being Nintendo's first piece of hardware to handle truly complex 3D, developers also complained that it was almost impossible to unlock the console's true potential. Whether this actually had much

connect the chip's millions of transistors, IBM not only reduced the size of the chip, but it also enabled it to run on less power and at a lower temperature – all crucial features considering GameCube's intended size.

The result, named Gekko, was a customised PowerPC 750 processor, with extended functionality, particularly with respect to the efficiency of the data bandwidth management between it and GameCube's graphics chip. The console's specification lists this bandwidth as 1.6GB/second, peak. Cache and floating point performance was also tweaked: Gekko has 32K of L1 instruction cache, 32K of L1 data cache, 256K of L2 cache and offers 32bit integer and 64bit floating-point

Much of the confusion about the GameCube's capabilities arose from Nintendo's reluctance to get involved in the specification war

bearing on the quality of software created for the N64 is open to debate, considering the draconian commercial terms Nintendo offered publishers seeking to release games on the cartridge-based platform. Nevertheless, these two factors combined in Nintendo's choice for GameCube's central processing unit.

IBM chips in

With a reputation for chip manufacturing second to none, IBM proved to be the perfect partner for GameCube's CPU, especially as it offered its proven RISC (Reduced Instruction Set Computer)-based PowerPC architecture. This architecture, which can typically carry out a lot more processing per clock cycle than the equivalent CISC (Complex Instruction Set Computer) processor from, say, Intel, has been used in products such as Apple's G3 computers, as well as hundreds of embedded and system-on-chip solutions. Another advantage was the widescale availability of programming tools, such as compilers and optimisers, for the format, which enabled developers to get up and running quickly.

Other companies were in the running for the GameCube CPU, too, most notably NEC, which had provided the N64's original CPU. However, IBM's Advanced Personal Technologies Business Line spent long hours working with Nintendo, tweaking its basic PowerPC design to create a CPU that would be ideal for a game console. Equally important was the fact IBM could offer its copper manufacturing process for the 0.18-micron chip. By using copper interconnects rather than the usual aluminium wiring to

performance. Initially clocked at 405MHz, Gekko's final frequency was upgraded to 485MHz as Nintendo fine-tuned GameCube's architecture before starting full-scale production.

Making graphics

Although Nintendo had turned its back on N64 partner NEC when it came to choosing a CPU for GameCube, it was keen to stick with the team that had designed the original N64 graphics chip. However, many key members had since left their employer (Silicon Graphics) and already set up a new graphics chip design house, called ArtX (now part of ATI). So in 1998, Nintendo asked ArtX to work from scratch on what would eventually become known as the Flipper processor.

As with Gekko, Flipper was designed to be easy to use, powerful and yet cheap to manufacture. One of its key features is the large amount of very fast on-chip memory for graphics processing. The 3Mb of on-chip RAM, split into 2Mb of frame and Z-buffer RAM and 1Mb of texture RAM, make up around half of Flipper's 51 million transistors. Both internal memory buffers have a sustained latency of under five nanoseconds. The frame and Z-buffer memory is capable of 9.6Gb/second of bandwidth, while the texture buffer boasts an even faster bandwidth of 12.8Gb/s. In addition to this, Flipper is supported by 24Mb of external main memory on a bus with a bandwidth of 3.2Gb/second. But instead of conventional DRAM, this, as well as the on-chip RAM, consists of single-transistor SRAM (1T-SRAM), which is slightly slower with a latency of ten nanoseconds, but is easier

for developers to use to its full potential.

Flipper wasn't to be just about graphics, though. It also contains the GameCube's audio digital signal processor. This 16bit chip, clocked at 101.25MHz, is capable of 64 simultaneous 48KHz voices, and thanks to the work of developer Factor 5, supports Dolby's Pro Logic II surround sound standard, via Factor 5's MusyX sound-editing tool. Other hardware features handled by Flipper include the GameCube's input/output connectivity for system devices such as the Gekko CPU, as well as peripherals like controllers, optical disk, flash cards and modem. Such functionality is supported by 16Mb of DRAM. Originally clocked at 202MHz, Flipper's frequency was dropped to 162MHz for the production silicon, in conjunction with Gekko's frequency uprating. This was done to ensure GameCube was a well-balanced system in terms of performance, cost and power dissipation. Ironically, considering it lost out to IBM with respect to the CPU, NEC then won the contract to manufacture Flipper, opening a dedicated 0.18-micron fabrication plant in 1999.

End games

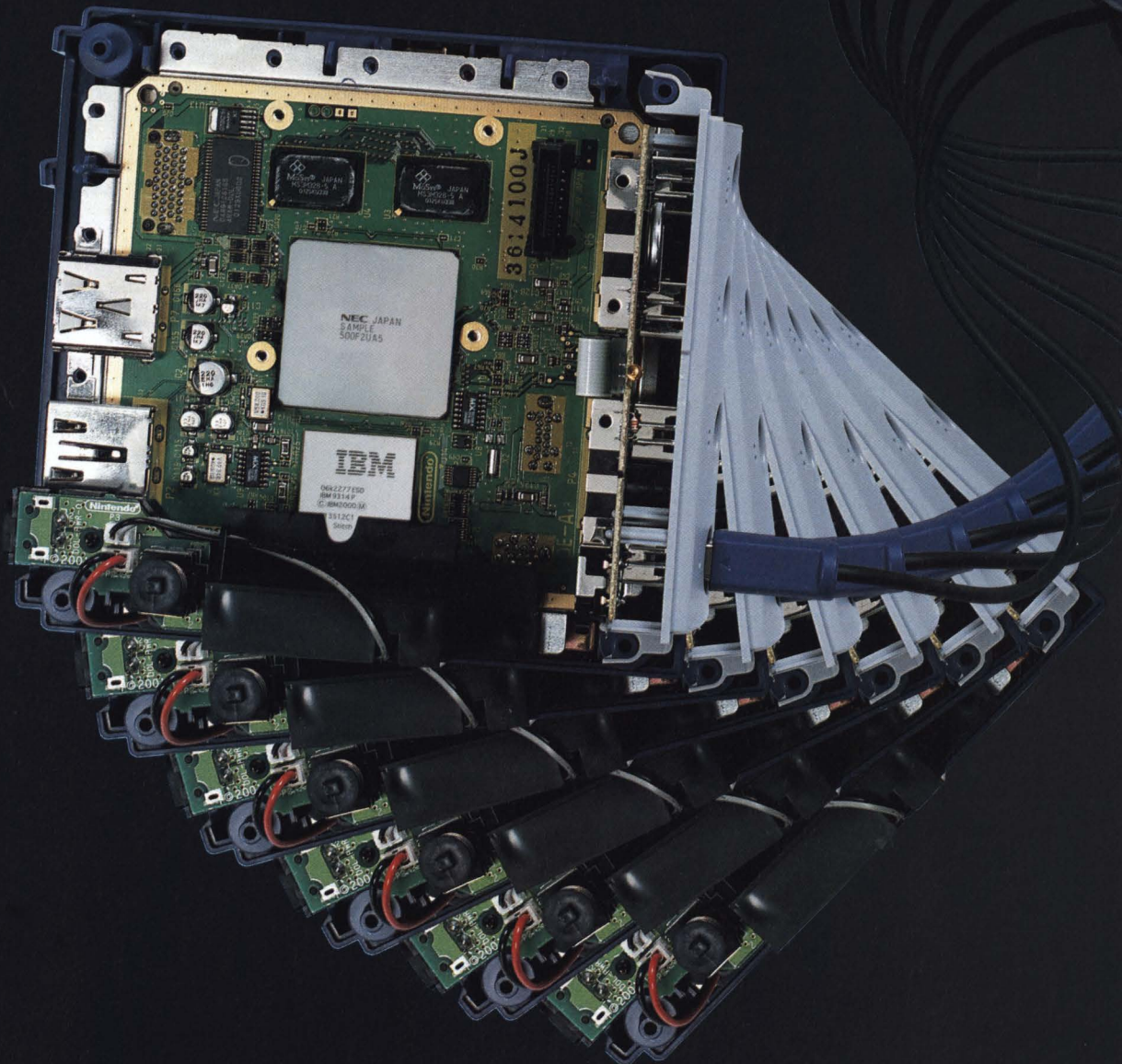
Power without control, however, is nothing, and technical specifications aside, the most important feature of GameCube is the way it enables developers to get on with the job in hand. By emphasising productivity over raw performance, Nintendo hoped to reduce the overhead for developers. Solid tools and a straightforward system should mean GameCube content is cheaper and/or faster to produce than that of other consoles.

One way Nintendo has attempted to enable this is by offering a range of hardware-enabled effects which developers can exploit without any performance hit. These range from straightforward visual enhancements such as anti-aliasing to effects such as bump-mapping, alpha-blending, bilinear filtering and fog. Up to eight realtime lights can also be rendered for free. Another advantage is Nintendo's use of texture-compression technology, which reduces texture size six-fold. Combined with the ability to multi-texture up to eight textures per pass, it enables powerful graphical styles to be created with relative ease.

And this is the real legacy of GameCube. Every part of its design has been crafted to create the ultimate videogame console. No useless USB ports or secondary-use DVD-playback. Nintendo designed GameCube without pretension to be anything other than a box that plays games. If in five years' time, it's not seen as a success, it won't be because of the quality of the hardware. Sadly, Nintendo

only seems to have learned from the technical mistakes of the N64, not from the mistakes it's made with respect to the importance of developer and publisher support.

As the truism goes, hardware doesn't sell hardware – games do. If hardware sold hardware, GameCube would be up there, vying with PlayStation2. But as it is, those with a cynical take on the industry might, as they look forward to the emergence of the next round of massmarket hardware, look back at GameCube and see the last true videogame console.



Thinking inside the box: making GC sing

Nintendo carefully crafted GameCube to make it easy for developers to get to grips with, but getting the most of the hardware isn't just about handling the technical issues. Developers explain all to **Equip**



"GameCube has some nice chips that make texturing quick and easy... but in our experience the lack of polygon-pushing power lets it down," says Harvey Gilpin, whose *Bionicle: Makuta's Revenge* is on PS2, too

Considering programmability was one of Nintendo's main priorities when designing GameCube, it should hardly come as a great surprise that developers praise its easygoing manner.

"My first reaction was one of pleasure," says **Ian Tomkins**, lead programmer at Midlands-codeshop Silicon Dreams, currently working on the cross-platform game *Urban Freestyle Soccer*. "I was aware of the difficulties programming N64, so I was expecting a hard time, but GameCube's proved to be very straightforward and simple to learn."

"What initially impressed me was the quality of the demos Nintendo provided," agrees **Andrew Perella**, head of programming at driving specialist Eutechnyx. "There was one particular demo of a car, the graphical quality

of which really excited me."

One reason GameCube is so easy to get to grips with is the quality of the programming environment Nintendo provides. Many coders comment on the elegance of its application programming interface (API), for example. This high-level language is the easiest way to get games running on the hardware.

"After previously working on graphics engines for the PC and Xbox using DirectX [Microsoft's API], I was impressed with GameCube's API," reveals **Ian Lindsey**, lead programmer at Team 17, the studio currently working on a 3D version of perennial favourite *Worms*. "The API is much cleaner in comparison to DirectX and because it's similar to OpenGL, it meant our *Worms* code could be ported easily, as much of it was already in place."



"Some games, like *Metroid Prime*, are probably pushing GameCube pretty close to the limit," believes Andy Beveridge of dev tools specialist SN Systems. However: "There are other examples that don't even use 70 per cent of the available capability – partly because, for many, GameCube is not their lead platform"

This, in particular, underlines the importance of Nintendo's decision to choose IBM's PowerPC-based Gekko CPU and ArtX's Flipper graphics chip as both rely on OpenGL as their graphics API. Controlled by a committee of graphics hardware and software companies, OpenGL was originally created by Silicon Graphics, which incidentally was where the majority of Flipper chip creator ArtX's employees had previously worked. And in addition, some PC game programmers prefer to use OpenGL instead of Microsoft's DirectX for Window-based games, increasing the size of the experience pool even further.

The benefit of experience

"With GameCube, things just tend to work," says **Andy Beveridge**, managing director of

SN Systems, which develops Windows-based programming tools for GameCube as well as PS2. "Anyone with a bit of 3D programming experience – say, from doing a bit of OpenGL stuff – can get simple 3D graphics up and running in a few hours and complex graphics in a few days. The CPU and graphics hardware are well balanced and there are few nasty quirks that could catch people out. GameCube is a beautifully elegant design and I take my hat off to the people at Nintendo and ArtX who put it together."

In contrast, Sony's design philosophy for PlayStation2 means most game code must be custom written, making it much more time consuming and expensive to develop games for its console. The flipside, though, is that it's hard to implement a graphical feature or effect

not supported in GameCube's API.

"GameCube is a fixed-function piece of hardware," explains Lindsey. "You're essentially limited to what the API makes available to you, so if you want to create a custom effect, you have to bite the bullet and try to emulate it somehow." Potentially, at least, this means a lot of GameCube games look similar – something that hasn't yet been noticed by the gaming public because of the general paucity of software released for Nintendo's machine.

Going under the bonnet

Making a console easy to program is laudatory, of course, but never enough if it doesn't also have the graphical performance to ensure that games look fantastic compared to the competition. On this point, at least, there is



In terms of pushing GameCube further, Andrew Perella, head of programming at Eutechnyx (currently working on *Street Racing Syndicate*), is not convinced that there's much juice left to be squeezed: "Our GameCube renderer is already highly optimised, so there is little room for improvement there." That may be the case, but the format remains the most accessible to newcomers, as Ian Tomkins, programmer of *Urban Freestyle Soccer* (opposite), attests



some divergence between developers.

"GameCube is significantly faster than PlayStation2 but the smaller main memory causes real hassles," reckons **David Braben**, managing director of Frontier Developments, which is currently working on a GameCube version of its *Wallace & Grommit* game. Compared to Xbox's 64Mb of unified memory and PlayStation2's 32Mb of RAM for graphics, GameCube's Flipper graphics chip has only 24Mb plus some additional (and fast) on-chip memory.

In contrast, both Perella and Lindsey say that, in their experience, PlayStation2 has more graphical power, although this is offset, in part, by other abilities offered by Nintendo's console. "While GameCube doesn't have the raw fillrate of PlayStation2, and is slower at clipping polygons to the screen, it does support multitexturing, which gives it a significant advantage," says Perella.

Lindsey concurs. "PlayStation2 has more polygon-pushing power but GameCube has better caching," he says, suggesting that, handled in the correct way, the flexibility provided by GameCube's large on-chip graphics cache can make it faster even than Xbox. "Xbox needs everything to be batched up into large chunks of cache memory, whereas GameCube can outperform it when using smaller chunks of geometry," he explains.



Team 17's Ian Lindsey, lead coder on the forthcoming *Worms 3D*, praises GameCube's application programming interface, citing its advantages when it comes to porting code across platforms



But SN Systems' Beveridge warns that the relative performance of the three consoles is often dependent on the types of processing developers need to use for their specific titles. "If you're doing some crazy procedural rendering special effects with a lot of crazy maths, then there's little to touch PlayStation2," he says. "For straightforward 3D graphics, though, then GameCube can certainly match and sometimes exceed the capabilities of the other consoles."

Memory failure

If there's one area in which most developers agree GameCube suffers, it's Braben's complaint about the available memory. Despite Nintendo's choice of single-transistor SRAM, its total size at 24Mb appears to be the limiting factor.

"GameCube has some nice chips that make texturing quick and easy and the graphics API is excellent, but in our experience

the lack of polygon-pushing power lets it down badly," summarises **Harvey Gilpin**, senior coder at London-based Coyote Developments, which is working on the GameCube version of Lego's *Bionicle: Makuta's Revenge*.

"Even with the data compression available, it can be quite tight to fit everything in and performance can slow to a crawl when you are throwing around lots of large semi-transparent polygons," says Team 17's Lindsey. He also says some of the advantages provided by GameCube's ease of programming are negated by having to deal with the memory constraints: "Time saved is usually spent trying to organise and compress data to make it fit into the available memory."

In an attempt to get around this problem, Frontier has implemented a virtual memory system, which effectively uses the 16Mb of RAM reserved for audio and other GameCube systems as graphics memory. Even using this, Braben claims memory remains the most



limiting aspect of the machine. "GameCube is very capable but on the graphics side polygon counts and texture detail are often restricted not by the machine's performance but by the available memory," he says. "It could be pushed a lot further."

Looking ahead

Developing console games is by its very nature a case of diminishing returns. The hardware is fixed, so it becomes harder to squeeze more performance out of a console as time goes on. This is particularly the case for GameCube. Because Nintendo has made it easy to get to grips with, there are fewer potential tricks and tweaks for developers to learn how to utilise as they move from their debut GameCube games to their second and third attempts.

"Our GameCube renderer is already highly optimised, so there is little room for improvement there. I think the greatest performance gain in the future will come from use of art assets that are tuned more closely to the requirements of the GameCube," says Perella when asked how Eutechnyx can improve its future titles.

Beveridge thinks the problem is less about technical issues, however. "Some games, like *Metroid Prime*, are probably pushing GameCube pretty close to the limit," he says.



Because Nintendo has made it easy to get to grips with, GameCube has fewer potential tricks and tweaks for developers to learn how to use

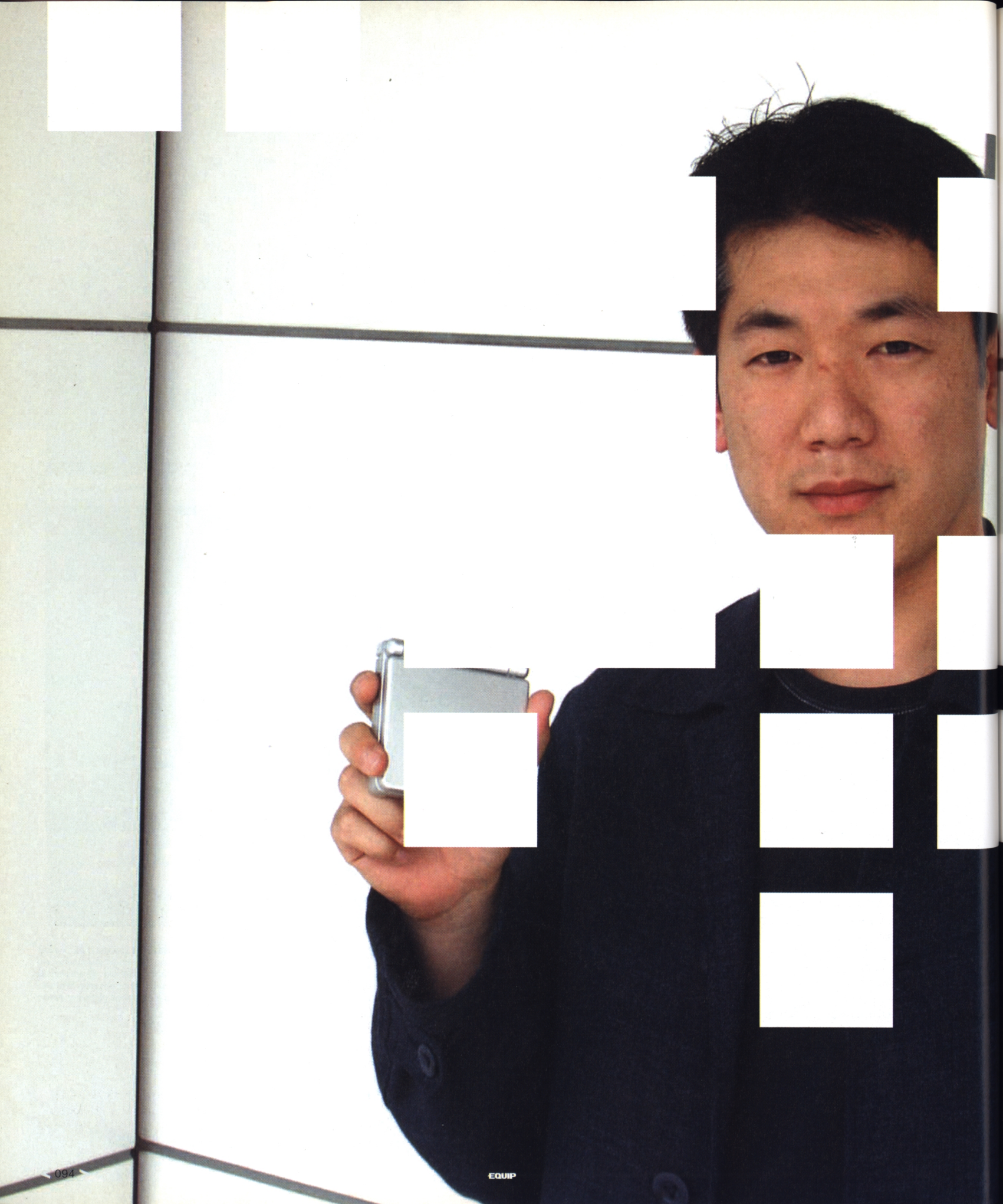
"But there are other examples in the current crop of GameCube releases that don't even use 70 per cent of the available capability – not because the developers have found it hard to tap into its power, but because they are under intense deadline pressure and GameCube isn't their lead platform."

So, sadly, it seems that the financial weakness of the GameCube retail market – especially compared to PlayStation2 – will be the main limiting factor on the quality of GameCube software. This is only compounded

by PlayStation2's tricky architecture, which means in most cases Sony's machine will be a developer's lead platform.

"Developers make sure they put a lot of effort into squeezing every last drop out of PlayStation2 but are unlikely to take maximum advantage of the GameCube's capabilities when porting code," summarises Beveridge. "It's a shame but at the end of the day it's about the number of copies of a game you can sell rather than how nice the console was to develop for."





Interview:

Kenichi Sugino

Nintendo has many hundreds of employees, yet very few of them get to share the limelight with Shigeru Miyamoto. At this year's E3 **Equip** was given the opportunity to speak to one of the key men behind the scenes – the creator of the Game Boy Advance SP

Kenichi Sugino is something of a legend at Nintendo – not that many people outside of the company's Kyoto HQ will have actually heard of him. In order to get up to speed on his contributions to the company's handheld success story to date, **Equip** began at the start...

So, which Nintendo products have you worked on in the past?

I was hired by Nintendo two weeks before the very first Game Boy was released. I was put on to the development team for the redesign. Since then I've only ever worked on Game Boy – Game Boy Pocket, Game Boy Colour, Game Boy Advance, Game Boy Advance SP. All of those were my design [laughs].

What have been the important changes you've seen at Nintendo in terms of hardware design since you began?

First of all the main changes we've seen all have to do with improvements in technology. We've always tried to design things that make the best use of the technology available.

There have been criticisms of the Game Boy Advance's screen. In hindsight, do you think the lack of a light source was a mistake?

No, I don't think it was a mistake at all. We always try to make the best use of the technology at hand. Something that's very important to us has always been the balance, and the price point. So for what we had to work with in terms of price and spec, the screen was as good as it could

have been at that time. Now you have this machine where the screen is bigger and the machine is smaller. Now we have this new wonderful small Game Boy that is better than we had 14 years ago. Do you wish you had this 14 years ago? But if we'd have tried to have made this 14 years ago, not only would it have been impossible but there's no way the consumer would have been able to afford it. If we had made it 14 years ago only the people on the streets of Beverly Hills would have been able to afford it.

The transition from GBA to Game Boy Advance SP has been very short, which

is why there's a perception that it was a knee-jerk response to criticisms over poor screen quality.

No, I really don't think so. Realistically from the time the SP was conceived to the time it was launched took two years. So we were already working on it. The development of Game Boy Advance was started over four years ago. At that point in time the price of a light was high; the capabilities were not there for us.

When you sat down to design the SP, what were your main considerations?

I wanted it to be simple. The Game Boy is sold all over the world. I am of course

Japanese but I am designing products that are going to be sold in America, in China, in Canada – all over the world. And in all of those places you have people that are all ages and sizes. What I always think when I sit down to design a product is how it can be utilised by the largest number of people. With the GameCube you have one unit in one house, but for me, when I think of the Game Boy, it's not one unit in one house, it's one unit for one person. If you look outside [Nintendo's E3 booth] there's 18 different coloured Game Boys lined up there and for me what I had to think of was how I could sell one of these, make one of these appealing to different people. So I designed the machine in a simplistic manner, and then by adding different colours I'm able to pitch it, or make people accept it just through colours.

So I started with the hardware with a simple slate, and by changing the colours I can make it appeal to a small girl in Germany. Or by making it black I can make it appeal to a slightly older gentleman in America. This is the way I conceived it.

How many design drafts did you get through before you decided on the final SP design?

There were very few phases of development. When I first conceived it it was going to be a great product. Of course it wasn't just one design, but there were very few. I tried to protect the very first idea that I conceived. When I sat down and started to draw it, if you ask how many drafts I had from phase to phase, I don't think I ever drew more than ten of them. So many people [at Nintendo] said: 'It's so simple'. They said, 'Is it not too simple? It's just a square box'. There were many people who had all these comments to make – 'maybe it's too simple, maybe we should make it round or add some curves to it'. [Animatedly] I had to fight off everything these people were saying in



order to protect my original vision.

There's no headphone socket – was that to keep the console small?

Yes, it's all about size. We actually tried putting one in there and when we did you would be surprised – the look and feel of it was a lot bigger. We actually made one with it and it was much, much bigger. It wasn't the fact that I didn't think we needed a headphone jack, I did. If I was able to put it in there, I would've done. When we played around with the options it was either to take the small size or take the large size with the headphone jack.

In Europe it's actually quite difficult to buy a headphone adaptor.

Wherever you can buy the hardware or the software for the Game Boy SP, you can also buy the adaptor. I've seen a lot of places in Japan where hanging next to the Game Boy SP on the wall is an adaptor for headphones.

That's not the case in Europe, unfortunately. Which must be disappointing for you.

Yes, that does bother me. I wasn't aware that this adaptor is not readily available. Really? I will find out more about that [scribbles in notebook].

Some users have also claimed that dust can get caught behind the screens of their GBA units.

We are doing everything we can to figure out how to improve on that and how to make sure it doesn't happen in the future. What we are doing now is working with the production factories that are building our Game Boy Advance SPs on their quality standards to make sure that when the machines are put together no dust enters behind the screen. Right now the ones we are building are not just in regular rooms like this, we are using some of the most state-of-the-art clean rooms in Japan. The actual screen unit that goes into the SP, before any of the construction engineers get their hands on that screen, they go through a number of doors and put on all their gloves and equipment before they even put their hands on that. We've been hearing this since the beginning and it does bother us that this criticism exists.

When it comes to dust getting behind the screen in this manner, with regard to

this machine... there is no machine in the world where dust does not get in to it. What we've had to do is create a quality standard at Nintendo and if it passes the standard that we have with regards to dust behind the screen then it passes. We actually have people in Japan who've wrote in and said, 'Look I have a complaint that there is dust behind the screen'. Actually, we looked at the machine and evaluated the problem and claims and found that none of them were actually behind the gameplay screen – they were all removed to the outer parts of the screen. When I think of these I think, Come on, it's at the outside of the play screen and we're doing our best. At the same time I understand that we are doing something that is a concern to our consumers and therefore I would like to fix the problem for them.

What's your personal take on Sony's PSP announcement?

[Laughs] When I hear the name PSP... as the designer of the Nintendo GBA SP, what comes to mind is the 'pseudo SP'.

You don't see it as a threat?

It would really be terribly difficult for me to comment honestly on this product. It was introduced to the press today and all they had was a spec sheet for it. It will take one and a half years from now and I have no

make a Game Boy it has to be well balanced. With these products I use the technology that is available to me at the time. For instance, ten years ago we had lithium batteries, but in one month we made an unbelievable number of these Game Boy units. But ten years ago when we started making these crazy numbers of Game Boys, even though we had lithium batteries, there were no companies that could turn them out to put them into our products. Even if we'd have wanted to pay the price, there wasn't a company out there that could have made them quick enough to put them into our Game Boy units. But in ten years cellular phone technology has improved dramatically and in line with that companies that were making batteries that go into these phones sprouted up tremendously fast. And due to that there are companies that can keep up with the pace of Game Boy units that we were making and incorporate them into Game Boy units. This is the same situation with the buttons we can use. It's only recently that we've come to use a button that is as thin as the one used by the SP. It simply wasn't possible in the past. The same is true of the light.

In the future, even two years from now, even five years from now, I figure I'll still be working on Game Boys. I of course want to introduce the best, most fascinating machines to people. In the future if I'm able

“What do I think of Sony's PSP? When I hear the name PSP... as the designer of the Nintendo GBA SP, what actually comes to mind is the 'pseudo SP'”

sense of what it's going to be like so it would be difficult for me to comment truthfully on that. Since it's been announced, one of the things I'm thinking about constantly now is what could it become. I'm terribly interested in what they will be able to do with it.

What for the future of the Game Boy brand? Will you eventually turn it into some kind of multimedia machine that plays audio and movies, or are you happy to focus on games?

Well, as a designer I'd love to be able to tell you exactly what's going to happen with Game Boy. The reason for that is when I

to take the capability of seeing a movie and put it in there at a price that is fair to the consumer then yes there's a possibility that we could put it in.

Finally, do you get involved with making Game Boy Advance games at all?

Up until this point I have only been involved in making hardware, but a long time ago I used to create games myself.

I was among the staff on the very first *Super Mario Land*. I would have liked to have continued to make games but my experience tells me I should work on better hardware. All my efforts and all my time are focused on that.





Zelda:

Nintendo's



Is the tide turning against the doe-eyed derring-doer? In an effort to clear things up, **Equip** delves deeper into Nintendo's most important GameCube release to date

As **Edge** said in its review of *The Wind Waker*, Link has become that old best friend you only get to catch up with once every few years. A new job, new vehicle and a haircut can't hide the shared sense of instant familiarity, and there's a certain comfort in knowing somebody from when they were only *this* many pixels high. For those in his close personal circle, his tales of adventure are more highly anticipated than a night spent in the company of Mario or Samus.

But this year's get-together was different, somehow. Is it that he's trying to ingratiate himself with a younger crowd? Is it the way he's casually pulling out all his old party tricks

as if they were still fresh? Whatever the precise reasons, they're sufficient to have old players and new arguing over whether he's really the 10/10 golden boy he used to be.

Such exchanges are hardly unexpected, but a minor revelation from Nintendo's own designer Golden Boy and a critical appraisal of *Wind Waker's* design ethic point to more weighty implications of changes at the very heart of Nintendo itself.

Could it be that the company that once 'saved' diehard gamers from the massmarket excesses of Sega, then Sony, then Microsoft, is about to take a step beyond the very principles that have kept it held in such high

Awakening?

As well as a new generation of players, there's also an eager audience who've stayed with the series for years. Is it any wonder that some of them feel a little underwhelmed?



regard? Or is it that *Zelda*'s most loyal fans are also the hardest to please?

Familiarity

You reach a room with a locked door. On either side are two unlit torches... There are puzzles that, in various iterations, have become running motifs throughout the *Zelda* series, engaging for newcomers but also reassuringly familiar to old hands. *Wind Waker* goes even further by directly lifting some of the puzzles used in *Ocarina of Time*. Tried and tested, they're guaranteed to win over a new audience with just the right amount of challenge before the reward. That's an important feature of a game that is otherwise reluctant to put its protagonist in any kind of life-threatening danger.

And here we begin to get an idea of why *Wind Waker* can divide opinion. At what point does familiarity step beyond the boundaries of comfortable recognition? How often can players expect to be excited by the discovery of a boomerang, or to be challenged by a boss whose weak spots they know in advance?

It's a no-win situation for Nintendo. *Wind Waker* goes out of its way to draw in a new generation of players, and introduce them to the *Zelda* formula for possibly the very first time. Doing so is essential to Nintendo's business. But there's also an eager audience who've stayed with the series for years. Is it any wonder that some of them are feeling a little underwhelmed? And are they simply asking too much?

Here, **Equip** examines Link's latest adventure on a point-by-point basis in an attempt to find the answers...

Homage or theft?

For many observers, the whole debate over 'Celda' was not so much an indictment of the new direction as an illustration of the problems that dog Nintendo in trying to adhere to its all-inclusive family gaming ethic. You can't please all of the people all of the time, and the most vociferous objections came from young teenage males unexpectedly presented with a prepubescent hero and a cute Disney styling. Web sites and newsgroups suddenly bloated with the text equivalent of storming out of the room and slamming the door, while those fans either too young to care or old enough to be parents themselves typically couldn't understand the fuss.

If the Disney comparison is often made lazily, it's nevertheless accurate. The dark palettes, purple shadows and curlicue explosions recall the Hollywood studio's vintage features far more closely than anything from Warner Brothers, and a couple of boss details suggest that the Maleficent showdown from 1959's 'Sleeping Beauty' was certainly on one artist's mind. *Wind Waker*'s Moblins are positively breathtaking, as if a whole team had been dedicated to the realisation of their quivering snouts and comical jaw-dropping. And though it's a shame that the same effort isn't invested in some of the other inhabitants, notably villagers, it still represents a significant leap



An intriguing aspect of the game is the obviousness of its inspiration in places. But it's always gorgeous

over the monsters of *Mario Sunshine*.

A second influence is closer to home for Nintendo, and fans of quality anime will have no trouble spotting references to the work of Hayao Miyazaki. It's not enough to cite a common folklore as inspiration when the Koroks are undeniably fashioned in the style of the kodama tree-spirits from 'Princess Mononoke', and the forest dungeon's monocular spiky balls tumble just like the susuwatari soot-sprites of 'My Neighbour Totoro' and 'Spirited Away'.

To an unprecedented degree, then, Nintendo has stolen as well as invented to create the first true attempt at an interactive cartoon. The irony is that, within

five minutes of picking up the pad, the groundbreaking graphics become second nature and take a backseat in your attention. But that's as it should be. And when so many games still parade the building blocks of their polygons and textures to the naked eye, *Wind Waker* pulls off a *Yoshi's Island* coup in 3D to express a strong and distinctive style of animation that completely obscures the technology behind it. If the accomplishment has largely gone unnoticed, it marks something of a watershed when teenagers cease haggling over tech specs to argue about aesthetics and appeal instead.

Seafaring

It's Link – but in a boat. The fantasy world of pirates, cutlasses, cannonballs, hidden treasure and salty lashings of yo-ho-ho sits comfortably with the *Zelda* mythos, and promises a novel excursion on the high seas. The setting really works too, providing some richly atmospheric scenery as you find yourself being sucked in by denizens of the deep or scaling crow's nest watchtowers to sneak up on scurvy Bokoblins.

But this is where Nintendo's swash really starts to buckle, as the best action is still found when Link is on solid footing. There seems to be no coherent preconception of how boat combat was supposed to play, let alone conjure up the fun you'd expect from that initial mental imagery. Instead of an overarching vision of nautical action, the design works upward by first recreating those classic *Zelda* dungeons to fulfil the brief, then adding some alternative ocean-based functionality for the existing dungeon items so that there's something to do with them out on the briny overworld. Anything that doesn't fit is cruelly greyed out (you don't expect Nintendo to place narrative or aesthetics before streamlined design, but is there any other reason why the Deku Leaf and the Sail aren't one and the same item?). And as a result, these items don't integrate into a cohesive system. When the land-based mechanisms so capably engender all sorts of interesting bow/bomb

and ice/hammer fighting combinations, it's a shocking disappointment to find that sea battles lack any such sophistication.

It's not just that the boomerang renders Link immobile at sea, or that the cannon doesn't support moving and aiming at the same time for pitched battles. It's as if the creators realised that they hadn't come up with something fun in itself, but instead of fixing it they instead reduced the number of ocean encounters to a minor annoyance.

Wind Waker's sailing aspect is not merely unfinished or flawed: it completely lacks vision from the outset. And if this sounds rather harsh, then observe how few battles with sea creatures you encounter, or how quickly you give up trying to collect monster treasure at sea, and how much easier it is to sail on past instead of getting involved...



Combat on the high seas is a disappointment. For such a deep game, it's a shallow touch



The overworld

Ask any group of gamers to name some of the highlights that mark out previous *Zelda* titles and you'll find the Light & Dark worlds of *Link To The Past* have made a lasting impression. What's interesting is that you'll get the same result by questioning a room full of game designers, equally in awe of Nintendo's accomplishments. Just when you thought you'd reached the end, a warp tile sent you to a strange and dangerous place. Worse, a quick glimpse of your worldmap revealed an entire landscape of volcanoes and shadows.

Miyamoto-san's vision must doubtless have created headaches for his level designers, but the final result invoked a magical feeling: players not only had to grasp the cleverness of planning a route by zipping back and forth between two planes, but they also got an emotionally engaging glimpse of the very familiar world they were trying to save, were it to fall to the power of the dark side.

Ocarina Of Time worked on a similar premise, but it was the passage of time that differentiated the alternative worlds. And when Capcom reworked the formula for its GB *Zelda* farm-outs, it also created items that subtly altered the environment. It's nothing less than a recognised element of the series. Newcomers may not know what they're missing, but it should be no surprise that *Wind Waker's* biggest disappointment for long-term fans is that it dispenses with a multi-faceted overworld altogether.

And yet, it does try something new. Take a broad view of Nintendo's major titles – *Mario*, *Metroid* and *Zelda* – and the recurrent theme that engages us every time is the excitement of exploration. Each game uses the same formula in its own fashion, and we all know it by now. You're presented with a dauntingly big world to play in, often taunted by unreachable areas, and each newly acquired talent enables you to make sense of an earlier puzzle to unlock a little bit more. *Wind Waker* may return to something much simpler, but it still sums up an epic feeling of open seas, distant shores and new worlds to discover.

The *Wind Waker's* world may not be as complex in structure as the lands of previous *Zelda* games, but it still manages to convey a sense of wonder

Challenge

There is no doubt that Nintendo has been hurt by criticisms of longevity ever since *Luigi's Mansion*, and more recently with *Pikmin*, even though any gamer with taste would favour quality of experience over completion time. *Wind Waker* is not a short game by any estimation, but the means employed to extend its lifespan take the concept of 'padding out' to new degrees of chorishness.

To access the final dungeon, the player has to hunt down eight special treasure maps. These maps are useless until the player has also gathered the cash to translate them for an arbitrary and extortionate 398 rupees each, and then there's the task of using the maps to visit previous locations and raise eight Triforce pieces in a skill-free act of perseverance. More repetition awaits in the re-appearance of vanquished bosses.

At the same time, *Wind Waker* rarely sees you fearing for your life. Bosses can be beaten on the first encounter without breaking into a sweat, and danger only rears its head if you haven't sussed what to do. (After a rare death by misadventure, *Equip* pronounces the comedy giant pig deadlier than any boss and warns against taunting it, chicken-style.)



Some of the game's trickiest aspects can come into play during combat against larger, non-boss foes, although it's notable that at no point does the competent player risk losing his life. This is laidback gaming

Conclusion

The worst-case scenario derives from the knowledge that Nintendo's success was not solely based on the design genius of Shigeru Miyamoto. Its trademark ethic of polishing every title to perfection has always made rival developers envious of the company's huge resources, and Nintendo has even taken that principle to the point of direct assistance and involvement in the development of favoured thirdparty titles.

On his recent trip to London, Miyamoto-san openly admitted that two stages,


including their dungeons, had been dropped from the final game in order to meet deadlines. Given that the director was Eiji Aonuma, the man behind *Majora's Mask*, we can look forward to some kind of similar reworking of *Wind Waker* that will unveil those sections when time allows. But this revelation will come as no surprise to anyone who's already completed the game and felt they were sold short on dungeons. The most obvious gap might involve Nayru's Pearl, the last of three key treasures needed to advance

the main storyline: just as players are building up for a third dungeon, Link is merely handed the last Pearl in a cut-scene and shooed away.

It's rare for any designer to admit that a game is finished. There's always a little more they wished they could have done here and there, and Miyamoto-san's influence within Nintendo must be responsible for some of the delays we've seen in the past. But in this instance, the missing material is sufficiently large to imply some judgement on the side of safety after the totally uncharacteristic

appearance of bugs in the release version of *Super Mario Sunshine*. *Wind Waker* thankfully restores that reputation for polish, and the time saved was obviously well spent. But at what cost to the final game? It's a lose-lose situation for Nintendo, so often criticised for taking so long to deliver the titles that really matter. But does this mean that regular commercial output finally takes precedence over its customary delays and 'it'll be ready when it's ready' thinking?

On his recent visit to London, Miyamoto-san openly admitted that two stages, including their dungeons, had been dropped from the game in order to meet deadlines



The making of...

Metroid Prime

Rarely has a title been subject to so much negative pre-release speculation as Samus Aran's fifth adventure. Which make its creators' achievements all the more impressive, of course. **Equip** finds out how it was done



It lasted mere seconds; more teaser than trailer, and less was more.

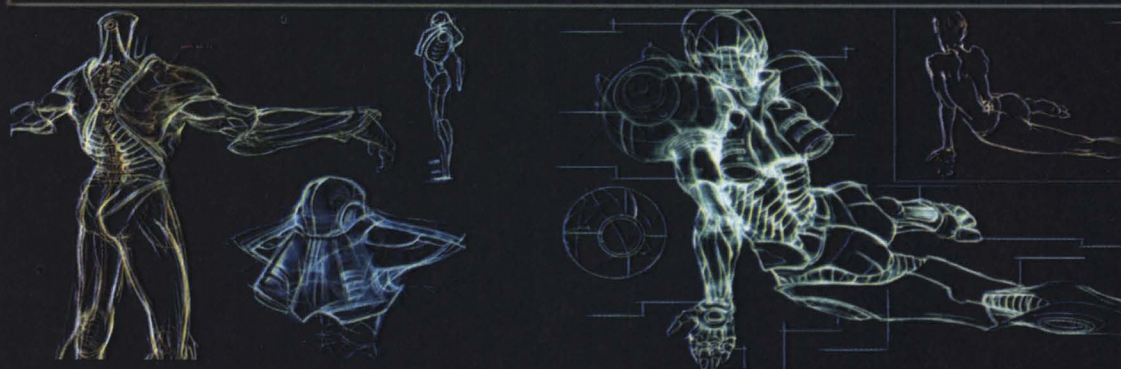
Buried, unheralded, in a video demonstration of the GameCube's potential at Nintendo's August 2000 Space World event, Samus Aran made her most important animated steps since the conclusion of 1994's widely acclaimed *Super Metroid*. Evoking what many described as the 'biggest cheer of the day' – arguably eclipsing Mario, overshadowing Link – Aran's appearance was a measured statement of intent. Later, Nintendo cleverly downplayed the significance of the clip. A *Super Metroid* sequel was not necessarily in development, the company advised. It remained a possibility, a potential GameCube release, and no more.

Having lit the fuse, Nintendo stepped

back from a resultant explosion of *Metroid*-themed speculation.

Almost certainly the most lamented no-show of the N64 era, a further *Metroid* game had long, oh so long been in demand. Adored by its many hardcore fans, a hit in the US, yet less commercially successful in its native Japan or Europe, *Super Metroid* is often described as one of the finest games to grace any hardware format, ever. Like its two predecessors, *Metroid* and *Metroid 2: Return of Samus*, it was part platform game, part adventure, with its shoot 'em up elements acting as a well-judged adhesive. Blessed with a remarkable atmosphere and an intricate, reward-oriented

Original format: GameCube
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Retro/NCL
Origin: US/Japan
Original release date: 2002 (US)



design, *Super Metroid* was always going to be a difficult game to update.

It's understandable that Nintendo deliberated for so long over a fourth instalment. The *Metroid* series is revered, and demanded a sequel of the highest calibre. Problematically, unlike 'crown jewels' like *Zelda* and *Mario*, significant worldwide acceptance (and, moreover, success) was not guaranteed. With in-house resources at a premium, Nintendo took the decision to rest Samus throughout the life of the N64.

Then, in 2000, with the GameCube launch approaching, Nintendo did something observers would have once regarded as unthinkable: it gave *Metroid* to Retro Studios, a development house with a great deal of individual talent... but a sum total of zero games published.

Formed in late 1998 by Jeff Spangenberg, erstwhile founder of Iguana Entertainment (best known for console hits *NBA Jam* and *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*), Retro Studios was billed, almost from day one, as an American Rare. With staff from the likes of id, Looking Glass, Valve, LucasArts and, of course, Iguana, it wasn't simply Nintendo's backing that marked it as a codeshop to watch.

Although details were – and remain – somewhat scarce, Retro began work on an eclectic range of titles for Nintendo's forthcoming console, still provisionally known at the time as Dolphin. There was *Thunder Rally*, a driving game with combat elements; *Raven Blade*, an RPG; an NFL sports game, an FPS and reportedly, although never officially confirmed to **EQUIP's** knowledge, an adventure game starring a trio of female protagonists.

The *Metroid Prime* commission arrived later, and changed everything.

Hold everything

In time, all other Retro Studios projects would enter the purgatory of being on 'indefinite hold', or cancelled outright. Through 2001, *Metroid* zealots, fan sites and Web zines spread tales often apocryphal but occasionally plausible. Many believed that the switch to a firstperson perspective would be the death of the series; after a rumoured playable appearance at E3 2001 failed to materialise, the video footage shown seemed to somehow exacerbate hostility and cynicism from certain quarters. As rumours spread – never officially confirmed – of an alarmed Shigeru Miyamoto visiting Retro and being disappointed by what he saw there ("Like Darth Vader visiting the incomplete Death Star," as one particular Web zine put it), knives brandished after the announcement of the visual switch were wielded with renewed vigour.

Something so many didn't know, didn't ask during 2001, was that *Metroid Prime* was a collaborative effort between NCL and Retro – one a young, hungry codeshop packed with



proven and up-and-coming practitioners, the other the most talented (not to mention consistent) producer of triple-A videogames in the world. Design was decreed a shared responsibility, art and code duties given exclusively to Retro, while long-term *Metroid* composer Kenji Yamamoto would produce the soundtrack. What's more, the likes of Shigeru Miyamoto, Kenji Miki, Kensuke Tanabe and Akira Otani – among notable others – were assigned to both keep a watchful eye from the Mother Brain of NCL and, of course, to assist when required or as they saw fit.

Retro was Shigeru Miyamoto's choice to create *Metroid V*.

The controversial decision to switch to a firstperson perspective? Likewise.

Going thirdperson

When **Equip** speaks to Retro Studios it is mere days before E3 2003, yet lead designer **Mark Pacini**, lead artist **Todd Keller**, tech leads **Jack Mathews** and **Andy O'Neil** plus engineer **Alex Quinones** all make time to speak about their work on *Metroid Prime*.

So when, **Equip** asks, was the decision made to adopt a firstperson perspective? And were alternatives ever considered? "We received clear direction at the very beginning from Mr Miyamoto that this *Metroid* game was to be played from a firstperson perspective," reveals Mark Pacini. "At first, we were apprehensive about this radical departure from the franchise because it was something that we would have probably never considered.

After spending time coming up with a direction for the game and what the player would do, the firstperson perspective actually suited the style of gameplay better than we could have imagined."

Were staff at Retro Studios intimidated by the pressure of updating such an esteemed series? "Most of us here at Retro were rabid fans of the *Metroid* franchise," enthuses Pacini, "so getting the chance to create a game based on that world was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Sure, the prospect of living up to the immense expectations of this game was intimidating at first, but if you never take a risk or try something difficult that may result in failure, it is very hard to stand out from the competition and be innovative. *Metroid* had the potential to put Retro on the map even though it was our first title, and that was something we were willing to take a risk to do."

The notion that Retro might have casually reinvented *Metroid* as a common-or-garden FPS – and that Nintendo would have ever allowed that – seems, with hindsight, quite ridiculous. The Retro team, such fans themselves, would have been equally aghast at the prospect. Work on *Prime* began, sensibly, with a refresher course. "After getting the green light for *Prime*, much of the team spent time playing the *Metroid* series, most notably *Super Metroid*," recalls Pacini. "Most of the team looked to *Super Metroid* for the inspiration and feel that we associated with the *Metroid* franchise. We felt that we could take the raw feel of *Super Metroid* – the exploration,

mood and the cool character development of Samus – and make those the cornerstones of our design decisions."

Taking cues from *Metroids* past, Retro began to lay the foundations of what would become *Prime*: a process that, given the outstandingly 'layered' nature of its forebears – something any sequel *had* to emulate – must have been an enjoyable challenge. "The first step was to determine the world and environments that Samus would be encountering in this new game," Pacini says. "This was very important to establish right from the very beginning because we felt it was a core

With the switch from side-scrolling 2D to a firstperson perspective – and the fact that players would only see her during occasional cut-scenes – it's heartening that Retro's 3D Samus is such a faithful recreation of her former sprite-based incarnations. She remains one of the most distinctive game characters ever devised

"We received clear direction at the very beginning from Mr Miyamoto that this *Metroid* game was to be played from a thirdperson perspective. At first, we were apprehensive"

aspect to the series. Then we decided on the abilities Samus would have in this new world and what features from the previous series would make a smooth transition into 3D. A very simple flow chart was then created to determine the pacing and pickup placement. This flow chart changed several times throughout the project, and had to be radically redesigned once after some production changes in the environment had to be made because of time constraints."

Central to *Metroid* games is Samus' Morph Ball ability – Miyamoto-san has opined in past interviews, quite rightly, that the feature is a key

ingredient. For Retro, updating the concept for fully 3D environments was a significant hurdle, and not simply on a technical level. "It took a great deal of time and effort to make this transition seamless and purposeful," admits Andy O'Neil. "In the very beginning, we came to the conclusion that this game would not be *Metroid* if Samus didn't have the Morph Ball. All of the game mechanics we wanted for the Morph Ball called for a thirdperson perspective, so we knew that a firstperson-to-thirdperson transition was going to be needed, and it had to be great. At first we were concerned from the

"In the very beginning, we came to the conclusion that this game would not be *Metroid* if Samus didn't have the Morph Ball. All of the Ball mechanics called for a thirdperson view"

standpoint of possibly interrupting the player's immersion. Pulling the player away from the game experience of 'being' Samus to all of a sudden become a metal ball was a risk. However, after several months of tuning, it turned out to be one of the coolest aspects of the game."

On first play, the decision by Nintendo and Retro to eschew the standard of dual-analogue control for *Metroid Prime* initially feels strange, almost jarring. Soon, though, it becomes second nature. By the time you collect a few beam weapons and visors, it's hard to imagine

using anything but its single-stick setup for movement. "Actually, that was something that was decided from the very beginning," reveals O'Neil. "Although a dual-analogue controller configuration is completely valid and a good solution for most games, we felt that it was hard for most casual gamers to use. So we set out trying to create a control scheme that automated some of the more complex movements. The lock-on system was spawned from that goal. We then tried to design gameplay elements and environments in a way that would stress locking on rather than moving and looking. The intent was to not have the player approach this game like a standard FPS. This was a new experience we were trying to create, which called for a fresh perspective concerning controls."

Unlike *Super Metroid*, which – understandably, due to a shortage of buttons on the SNES pad – required players to enter a menu screen in order to switch between power-ups, *Prime* allows easy access to Samus' abilities during play. Would the visor concept have worked so well were it necessary to enter a sub-screen to switch between them? Probably not. While on that subject, it's interesting to note that the visor was a feature introduced much later in development. "The visor functionality for Samus didn't actually get sorted out until about halfway through production," says Mark Pacini. "Nintendo had been looking at Samus' visor as

something that could be a unique feature for our game. So, we put a great deal of effort into making the visor much more of a central feature than originally envisioned."

"It actually took most of the development cycle to refine the control scheme," adds Jack Mathews. "We worked very closely with Mr. Miyamoto and Nintendo to make the control scheme for this game as user-friendly and fun as possible. The designers at Nintendo are masters of making controls that are intuitive, and they really contributed heavily to the final feel of them."

The vision takes shape

Lead Artist Todd Keller takes *Equip* through a potted history of how *Metroid Prime*, easily one of the most beautiful videogames yet seen, began to take shape.

"As far as the art team goes, the first thing we did was draw up the world concepts for the game, which in fact didn't change that much throughout the project," relates Keller. "Once we had established the ruins world, overworld, lava, mines, ice and intro with the design staff, we started working on textured pieces that we could use in the real world once the room design was laid out. Almost immediately after this – and actually during this – we designed Samus and her gun arm. This actually went through many revisions based on our comments and on Nintendo's comments. Eventually we agreed on a direction – what you see in the final game."

"Another very challenging part of the game's process was coming up with the firstperson look, the transition into Ball (which everyone was really excited about), and what Samus would look and act like in the cinema sequences. During all of this we came up with a lighting design for the worlds, we designed sky maps, and started on all of the creatures. The first batch of creatures was scrapped due to changes in game direction and layout, but overall we implemented what we wanted across all the worlds."

"The bosses were pretty much thought up next, and that was a major collaboration between the design staff, art staff, and programming staff. Once all that was done, we added cinematics relevant to the gameplay and story that was being established, added one extra ending level, came up with the ending to the game, finished off the in-game HUDs for Samus, and put in mini-boss situations. Tuning came next which caused a variety of changes across the board for the flow and atmosphere of the game. We made many geometry tweaks on the levels and adjusted the characters and animation a lot."

Ah, yes: architecture. Central to *Prime*'s undeniable aesthetic appeal is the sheer level of detail and imagination to behold in its many locales. Its environments are busy, packed with idiosyncratic touches; crumbling walls, tree



Those who have yet to complete *Prime* with a 100 per cent rating, avert your eyes. The above sketches show a glimpse of the 'perfect' ending to *Prime*, in which Retro alludes to a future nemesis for Samus: a Phazon-infused replica of her famous suit





Both forms of the uber-Metroid, the challenging end-boss Prime. Below: as with previous games in the series, a 'perfect' completion rating leads to a glimpse of Samus sans helmet

roots, pools of water. Although, by the very nature of its design, *Metroid Prime* requires willing suspension of disbelief while, say, hopping from one implausibly placed platform to another, it always feels *right*. Its maps are far from being a succession of repetitive, sparsely furnished rectangular areas. They have a remarkably organic, credible quality. How difficult was that to achieve?

"Well, we pre-planned most of the intricate geometry in detail, so once that was known, we pretty much just went ahead and built the environment," explains Jack Mathews. "The geometry that wasn't pre-planned was at least derived from the same style we had come up with for the game, so it all fitted together pretty well, and wasn't a problem to implement."

There is a very salient reason for why so many other firstperson games do not aspire to a similar level of architectural complexity: it can make the later effort of populating such areas a nightmare. When *Equip* asks Alex Quinones if the creation and fine-tuning of AI and pathfinding code was difficult as a consequence, his initial answer is a straightforward and very revealing: "Yes."

"In fact this was the toughest challenge, not only in handling enemy AI, but also with collision and physics," Quinones continues. "Given the diversity of creatures in *Metroid Prime*, it was necessary to create a

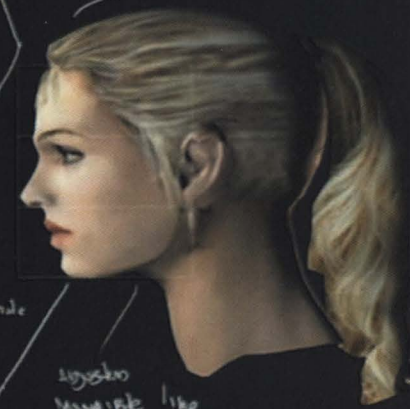
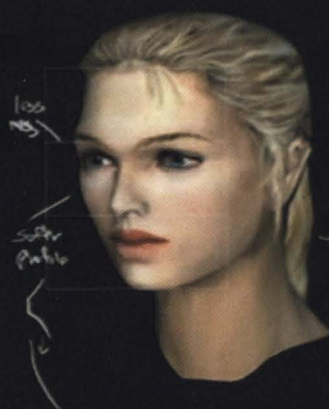
Gaols -
- more realistic
- smaller eyes
- improved profile
- softer lips

55° Established Face length

more hair

Smaller eyes
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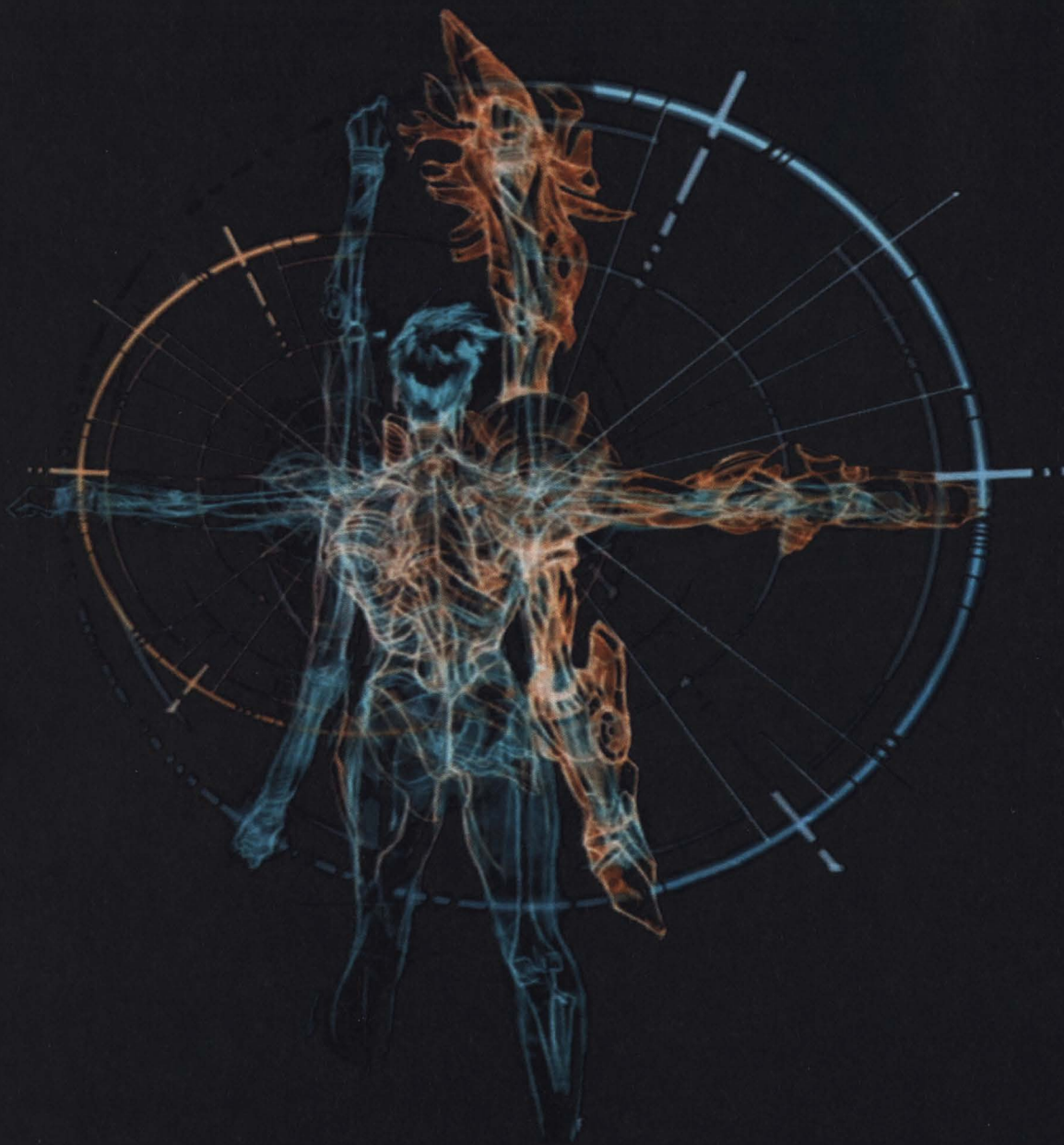
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1/17/2001 Samus Face
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Samus face model			
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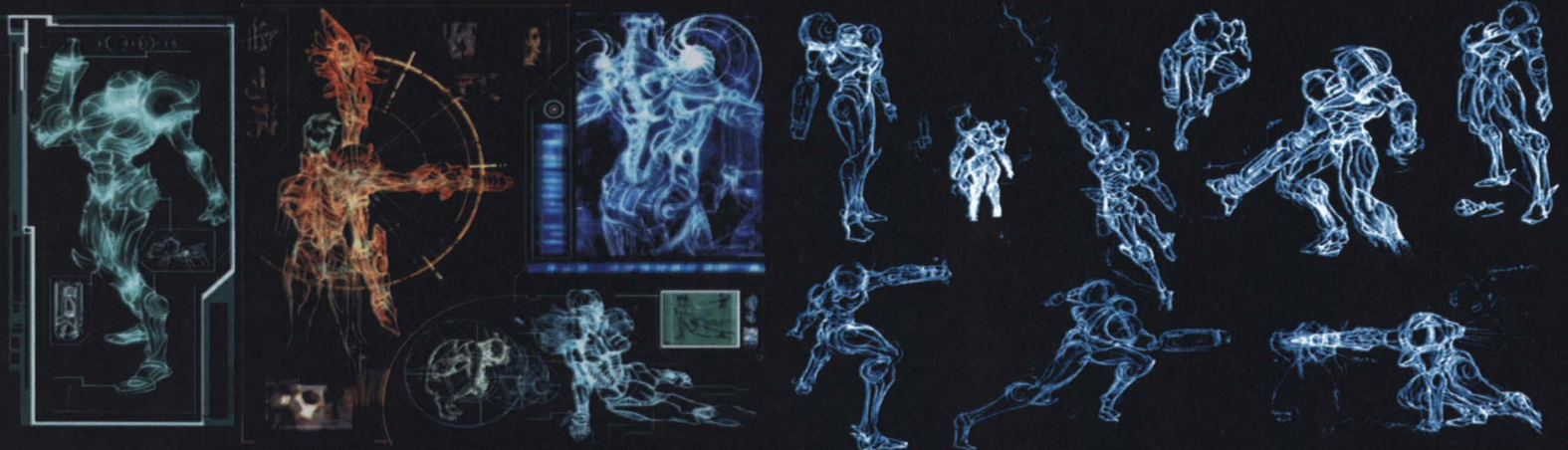


general-purpose path-finding solution. Our system needed to be able to handle characters both big and small, ground-based and flying. Furthermore, these characters needed to navigate around an organic environment in pursuit of a very agile player. In the end, I believe we came up with a system that allowed the creativity of our artists and designers to flourish, without imposing too many restrictions."

For a game developed in a little over two years, *Metroid Prime* is a truly outstanding technical achievement. It's ironic, perhaps, that one of its biggest accomplishments is one that was designed to be as unobtrusive as possible; an integral feature that many players will not have vocally, or even consciously acclaimed. "At the beginning of *Metroid* development, we didn't have much beyond a box with a camera stuck on it jumping around a full bright room," recalls Andy O'Neil. "Things started looking good when we had the streaming loading working, which was a major technical hurdle."

Imagine, for a moment, *Metroid Prime*'s marvellously coherent world punctuated frequently by the hands-off hiatus of loading screens. It's hard to understate just how important their absence is.

"When you enter a room and get near another door, the game will stream data needed by that room straight from the disc to main memory," explains Alex Quinones. "The CPU will decompress and load that data from memory in any spare time at the end of each game frame. The game design really lent itself



to the feature, since every room in the game is self contained. The hardest parts were dealing with the ever-growing size of rooms as they got more detailed, intelligently managing the problem of memory fragmentation, and organising assets on the game disc to minimise loading times."

It must have been daunting for Retro and Nintendo waiting for varied constituent elements – design, art, code – to be joined. How well would *Prime* play when they were combined? "The pacing of a game this complex is always difficult," says Mark Pacini. "We had one major redesign of the game flow, but after that point, only minor tweaks were made. The main problem in dealing with a game this large is that you don't know how correct the pacing of it is until it's almost all together. Before that point you have to rely on the designers' experience to know where to correctly place pickups and puzzles so that the game flows logically. Fortunately, working together with Nintendo, things worked out well."

'Game of the year'?

It was at E3 2002 that earlier doubts about the increasingly impressive *Prime* were almost entirely dissipated: even the most blinkered *Super Metroid* fans began chattering excitedly about its undeniable potential. Once seen as a troubled production, even a prospective disaster by some, E3 saw its billing enhanced to that of a plausible 'game of the year'. It was obvious to all that earlier jibes about it being 'Retroid', not *Metroid* – that Retro, not being

able to understand the appeal of the series, would simply produce an FPS starring Samus – were wildly erroneous.

Mid-2002, like a Magic Eye picture, *Metroid Prime* began to come into focus.

"By the time E3 2002 rolled around, huge progress had been made," recalls Andy O'Neil. "The team started to realise that we were working on something very good indeed. The last few months before the ship date there was a flurry of bug fixes. There were a few scary moments with show-stopper bugs that we had a hell of a time figuring out, but we persisted and hit our launch date."

"We really didn't have a good feel for the pacing of the game until about E3 2002, when we put together the intro level for the show," Mark Pacini admits. "Once we had it together and saw how all of these features interacted with each other, we knew we had something cool. It was a great feeling and kept the team going for the rest of development. It was an exciting and exhausting ride."

"This project was a huge undertaking," Pacini adds. "It was our first project, so we were developing our tools, building our relationships with Nintendo and trying to reinvent the firstperson experience all at the same time. The effort it took to get this game completed and to the quality expected was enormous. We had a great team that, through the good times and bad, managed to get the job done."

Final, conclusive vindication came with *Prime*'s US launch in November 2002, as the

labours of Retro and their partners at Nintendo met with vociferous praise. What's more, there are many who would describe it as Nintendo's best game since *Ocarina of Time* – hardly the faintest of praise.

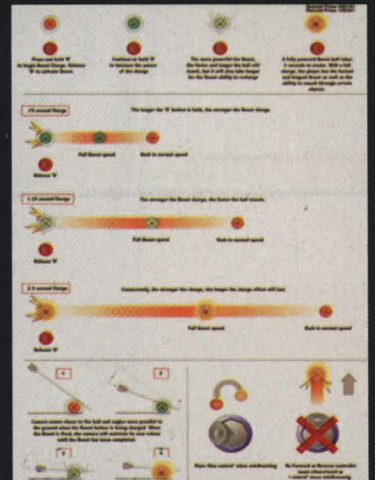
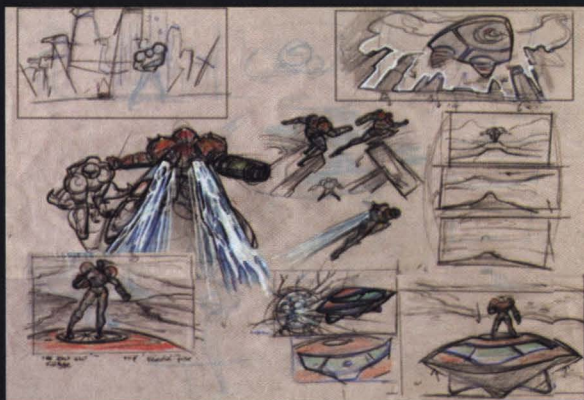
"The thing that pleases us most has been the wide acceptance of the game by *Metroid* fans," Mark Pacini tells **Equip**. "There was a great deal of scepticism in the beginning about the design direction of the game, but we worked very hard to make this a game not only appealing for casual gamers, but also a game that a true *Metroid* fan would enjoy."

"By the time E3 2002 rolled around, huge progress had been made. The team started to realise that we were working on something very good indeed"

This, *Equip* feels, has been *Metroid Prime*'s greatest triumph: its success in simultaneously pleasing so-called hardcore and mainstream gamers alike. Far from a dumbed-down '*Metroid Lite*', a gimmick-heavy reinterpretation lacking the essence of previous games, it is a sequel of rare quality: both loving, authentic homage and progressive successor.

Small wonder, then, that at a pre-E3 Nintendo press conference – mere hours before the completion of this article – the crowd experiencing a first glimpse of the provisionally titled *Metroid Prime 2* didn't simply cheer during the short video clip, it roared its approval.

E



With *Super Metroid* being a 2D game, Nintendo's designers had the luxury of being able to experiment with prototype environments. For Retro, the large, unavoidable gap between devising elements of *Prime* – Samus, her adversaries, maps, abilities, everything – and actually seeing them interact must have been hugely daunting

The big picture

Panasonic SL-GC10 GameCube-enabled DVD player

Photography: Martin Thompson





Panasonic
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DVD/GAME PLAY

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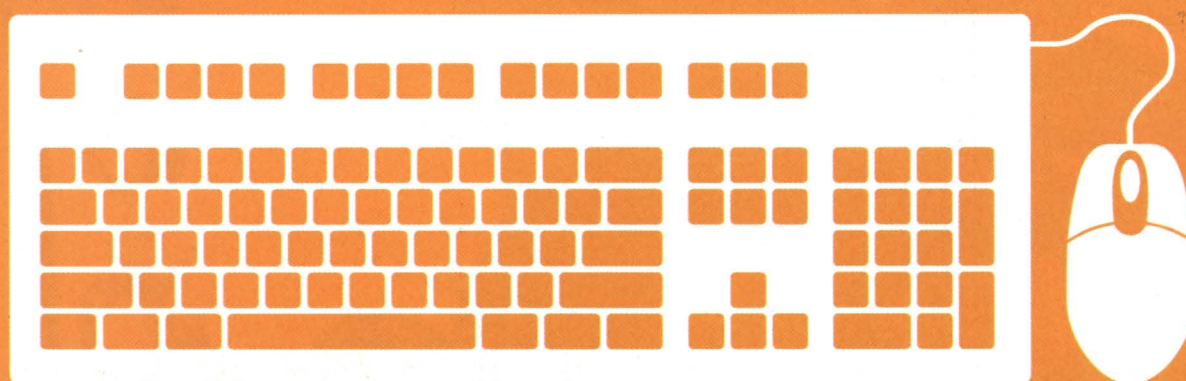
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